Expressions of Islamic Feminisms in Algeria and Saudi Arabia: Towards Intersectional and Feminist-postcolonial Approach

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

2018

Afaf M. H. Al-Humaidi

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPYRIGHT STATEMENT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSLITERATION</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Theory and Practice: Doing Feminist Research</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion in Intersectionality</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab Feminisms: A Reevaluation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISLAMIC FEMINISM: TRENDS IN ITS THEORIZATION</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When and Where is the Beginning?</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Islamic Feminism?</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i)slamic Feminism.</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for Indigenous Origins: Islamic Feminism and Legitimate Authority</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Autobiographical Studies</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab Autobiographical Discourse</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Overview</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: READING ZUHUR WANISI AS AN ISLAMIC FEMINIST: INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF HER TEXTS AND CONTEXT; A LIFE BETWEEN TWO JIHADS, TWO REVOLUTIONS AND TWO WARS</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN ALGERIA</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: RELIGION, GENDER, AND POLITICS IN ALGERIA FROM COLONIALISM TO INDEPENDENCE</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersections and Axes of Power in Algerian History</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial Period (1830-1962)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary Period (1954-1962)</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Independence Period (1962-present)</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Islamic ‘Awakening’ and the Rise of Islamism</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyse Islamic feminist practices and writings in the contexts of Algeria and Saudi Arabia. To answer the question of how Muslim women practice or write about Islamic feminism in these contexts, the level of analysis moved between the microcosm of women’s writings I chose as case studies to the wider macrocosm of their contexts; these local contexts are also effected by global events such as globalisation, 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’. My contribution to the literature of Islamic feminisms is that they should be considered within an intersectional framework and analysis where religion and religious identification or practices of religiosity are part of many experiences of women’s realities akin to race, gender, sexuality, and class; each effects and is effected by the other. This view helps us escape binary oppositions and categorisations and address the issues of multiple marginalisation or discrimination that women endure in the name of religion. Intersectional Islamic feminisms appreciate the complexity of women’s lives, identities and experiences, and the complexities of their contexts by showing the diversity of women’s voices and world-views that would challenge feminists and nationalists’ master narratives. More importantly, intersectional Islamic feminisms enfold a critical stance that constantly reflects on their own positions to avoid essential categorisations, or marginalisation of other positions. I showcase this theoretical framework of Islamic feminisms through focusing on two cases from Algeria and Saudi Arabia. Zohour Wanisi’s autobiographical work and writings reveal how the intersection of colonialism, anti colonial struggles and challenges of the postcolonial period intersect with her gender, class, education, language, religion and ethnicity. I argue that these coalesce and form a nationalist reformist type of Islamic feminism. Manal Al-Sharif’s memoir and her online writings and activism demonstrate how the intersection of her education, class, gender, ethnicity and occupation coconstructs her Islamic feminism through a complex and gradual process which is based on informed gender politics that targets multiple oppressions, through a transformed religious
belief and practice. This analysis is the first to discuss their work in English from this particular perspective.

Their constructed Islamic feminisms are also broadened and challenged by bringing other women’s voices into the debate and thus revealing a spectrum of Islamic feminisms that is far from dichotomous and more in dialogue. It was crucial in this context to develop a critical stance whilst simultaneously building on a richer conceptual definition of Islamic feminism's theorization and practices.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trademarks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DoculInfo.aspx?DocID=24420), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/about/regulations/) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
I followed the IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM

Available online from https://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/docs/TransChart.pdf
DEDICATION

I dedicate this to work to

My Daughters Sirin, Tulin, Alin and Nisrin; the joy of my life and heart and who were so patient
and supportive beyond their age.

My parents, Mastoohah and Muhsen, for being great and inspiring parents and for their constant
prayers and care

My sisters, Hanan, Sara, Dalal, and Raya and my brothers who support me in every possible way

And for my husband, Salman, for his support
and care

The readers of my work, hope you enjoy reading it

FOR ALL OF YOU THANK YOU
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Allah for making this work a reality.

Behind the success of this work is the dedication, encouragement and endless support of my supervisor Dr. Anastasia Valassopoulos. She accompanied this work, to the last minute, literally. She provided advice, feedback and interesting critical debates. I feel lucky to have her as my supervisor because her enthusiasm for research and her perseverance and optimism inspired me to embark on this research, since she was my tutor in the MA course Postcolonial Narratives. She kept inspiring me also during my PhD journey when things become overwhelming and challenging. I also appreciate her prompt and swift response to my emails and queries even during her leaves.

I also would like to thank my co-supervisor Professor Zahia Smail Salhi who provided me with valuable background information on Algeria during our meetings. Her constructive suggestions and feedback on Algerian context were very enlightening.

I also would like to thank Dr. Anke Bernau who was part of committee panel and read and commented on the early drafts of my work.

Special thanks to the researchers interested in Algerian context who were very generous to response to my emails or engage in dialogue. I am indebted to Dr. Natalya Vince who introduced me to the work of Zohour Wanisi. She also provided me with other networking opportunities through connecting me to Dr. Charlotte Courreye and Dr. Anissa Daoudi; both respond to my queries and were willing to engage in dialogue. I am also indebted to two researchers from Algeria: Professor Ahmed Mouloud, for sharing his research on women in the Algerian 'Ulama' Association with me and Dr. Chafia Seddik for responding to my emails. I also want to thank the Algerian man who bought Zohour Wanisi’s books for me and was very supportive by keep searching for them until he found most of them. He also added some books to the list and refused to receive the cost for any of the books. I do not know his name, but his generous act is very much appreciated. I am also grateful for the networking experiences through conferences and seminars with other Algerian researchers and PhD students. Some were facilitated by the collaboration of University of Manchester with Mostaganem University.

I also would like to thank very much my sponsor: Ministry of Education and Taif University for funding my scholarship and the Saudi Cultural Bureau in London for its constant support to facilitate the Saudi students living and learning in UK.

A special thanks to my friends and in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures especially Eman Al-Mutairi, who provided help during the time of submission, and everyone who has provided support in any way during my research. My study at the University of Manchester/ School of Arts, Languages and Cultures was very valuable and enjoyable experience. Thanks to any one who contributed to my learning journey here.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family back home for their prayers and support. I thank my small family who endured the hardships to accomplish this research and were very understanding and supportive especially my husband and daughters.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality, a theoretical and methodological approach emerging out of postmodern, post-structuralist, and black feminist thought as well as postcolonial feminism, has proven to be one of the most important contributions to feminist theory and research since the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Over the last 30 years, feminist scholars have productively applied intersectionality in their thinking and research to better understand how positionalities such as gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect to produce unique configurations of oppression and domination and shape one’s identity, social locations, treatment by others, worldview, life experiences, and life chances. With specific regard to feminists, intersectionality has revealed how one’s practice of feminism, views of feminists, and feminist agenda are all shaped by intersecting identities and positionalities. However, intersectional analyses of religion have received scant attention. Scholars have interrogated how religion and religious identity shape one’s views, life experiences, life chances, and work as feminists to a much lesser extent than gender, race, class, and sexuality. Specifically, there is a dearth of work on how Islam, identifying as Muslim, and practising Islam, shapes the lives and feminist agendas of Muslim women.

This thesis provides an opportunity to enrich both conceptions of secular Arab feminism and Islamic feminism by using an intersectional perspective to bring Islam into the fold, considering how Islam and a Muslim identity shapes the lives and work of women feminists working in two distinctive Arab contexts: Algeria and Saudi Arabia. Through analysing autobiographical and other texts written by Muslim women feminist activists in Algeria and Saudi Arabia, this research will show how the particular social, cultural, economic, political, historical, and religious contexts of each country shape the manifestation of Islamic feminism practiced there. The study focuses on women who both identify as Muslim and use Islam—including the Qur’an, other religious writings,
and Islamic history—as a political tool to advance their feminist agendas. They are Islamic feminists in terms of their identities and embrace of Islam in their private and public lives, using Islamic texts and history to practice their forms of feminism. For them, Islam represents a source of faith and identity as well as a political tool.

This thesis argues that the lines between secular Arab and Islamic feminism are not always clear and uses intersectionality to challenge binary approaches to feminism and the categorizations of different ‘types’ of feminism. Whose agenda is served by demarcating the lines where they are, and have been, drawn? What do we lose by drawing the boundaries where we have drawn them? What complexity and lived reality is lost by this practice of categorization? By bringing religion into an intersectional analysis, both the definitions of secular Arab feminism and Islamic feminism become more complicated and the lines between them blur. This is because both secular Arab feminists and Islamic feminists claim a Muslim identity that shapes their lives and their work as feminists.

This thesis, by elaborating on and comparing two cases—Algeria and Saudi Arabia—in which Muslim women practice Islamic feminism (i.e. identify as Muslim and use Islam as a political tool to advance their feminist agendas) will also show the array of manifestations of Islamic feminism that exist in the Arab world and how such manifestations are shaped by the social, cultural, economic, political, historical, and religious contexts in which such Islamic feminism is practiced. Thus, this thesis applies intersectionality theory to two levels of analysis: 1) the texts—women’s writing manifesting Islamic feminism; and 2) the context—the nation in which they practice Islamic feminism.

This thesis aims to complicate the existing definitions of secular and Islamic feminism and to trouble the boundaries between them using an intersectional framework. In so doing, this thesis attempts to reconceptualise Islamic feminism, based on the selected cases, in a way that reflects how it manifests and is practiced in different parts of the Arab world.
The primary research questions for this thesis are three-fold: How do Muslim women practice Islamic feminism in Algeria? How do Muslim women practice Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia? And, critically, what similarities and differences exist between the ways in which Muslim women write about or practice Islamic feminism in Algeria and Saudi Arabia? This comparative question lies at the heart of the question of intersectionality, as it relies upon the particularities of each case in order to illustrate the diversity of Islamic feminisms practiced throughout the world. In order to answer these questions, this thesis examines how Muslim identity and ways of living shape and inform how Islam is practiced in Algeria and Saudi Arabia, and how Islam is used as a political tool in each country to advance feminist agendas. Further, this thesis explores how historical, sociocultural, political, economic, religious, and geographic contexts shape how Islamic feminism is practiced in each country. Finally, with case studies outlining the particularities of Islamic feminism in Algeria and Saudi Arabia, this thesis compares and contrasts the intersections of Islamic feminism through the lenses of representation, language, and love and marriage. These themes allow us to examine the politics of Islamic feminism in both public and intimate life.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is divided into four sections. I present the relevant background to this study, including an overview of feminist theory and practice and a discussion of intersectionality, including its inception, definitions, approaches, modifications, and debates over its utility and limitations. I then examine theoretical and empirical applications of intersectionality to the study of religion broadly and Islam specifically. Next, I trace the various manifestations of and debates surrounding Arab feminisms and Islamic feminisms. Finally, I discuss women’s and Arab autobiographical criticism in historical perspective. Following this, I present my theoretical framework, which brings together intersectionality, Islamic feminism, and autobiographical criticism with postcolonial feminist theory, which I utilise especially in Chapter 4 as I discuss issues of representation, location, and language. I then discuss my methodological approach and provide an overview of the thesis.
BACKGROUND

**Feminist Theory and Practice: Doing Feminist Research**

Feminism is, by no means, a unified project (Letherby, 2003, pg. 3). While it can be said that feminists share concerns over the inequality between men and women and subordination of women, there is enormous disagreement over a plethora of issues that fall under the broad umbrella of these concerns, including the causes of and solutions for such inequality and subordination (Letherby, 2003), and even the very definition of what constitutes a ‘woman’ (Abbott & Wallace, 1997, pg. xiii). Yet, what unites feminists is their political commitment, as Kemp and Squires (1997) put it: ‘The single most distinguished feature of feminist scholarly work has been its overtly political nature and feminism’s commitment to material and social change has played a significant role in undermining traditional academic boundaries between the personal and the political’. According to Letherby, feminism is both ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ (i.e. praxis). Feminist researchers start with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women’s lives through social and individual change […] Feminist work highlights the fact that the researchers’ choice of methods, of research topic and of study group population are always political acts. (2003, pg. 3)

Carrying this thread of the political, feminist standpoint epistemology starts with the premise that the ‘personal is political’, declaring that the experiences of women provide a valid source of knowledge (Harding, 1987; Millen, 1997). As Letherby (2003) explained, ‘It is not just that the oppressed see more – their own experience and that of the privileged – but also that their knowledge emerges through their struggle against oppression: in this instance the struggle against men’ (pg. 45). By rejecting male claims for objectivity and embracing the unique perspectives that women hold, researchers using a feminist standpoint epistemology engage in reflexivity, by which they critique the research process while maintaining an awareness that producing knowledge is always political. Thus, a feminist standpoint is ‘grounded in the experience of women who are reflexively engaged in a struggle, and knowledge arises from this intellectual and political engagement’ (Letherby, 2003, pg. 45). Similarly, Kitch and Fonow (2012) understand reflexivity ‘as a way to
understand experiences of women from their own perspectives, to explain how researcher and researched are active agents in the construction of knowledge, and to consider how to represent ethically the phenomena under investigation’ (pg. 116). For Jalal (2013), reflexivity refers to the ‘normative and ethical dimensions of research’. She explains,

“It is by now well accepted that reflexivity in feminist research is not simply a matter of confessing one’s location in structures of class, sexual identity, ethnicity, or religion as a mode of making visible one’s privilege in relation to those one is ‘researching’ …and taking responsibility for the power relations that sustain all projects of social research. Feminist academics and researchers…have emphasized that our understanding of social and cultural realities is always already shaped by the relationship between the researcher and the researched and the location of both within larger sets of economic, political, and cultural relations…Reflexive practices help feminist researchers keep normative questions and ethical issues at the center of their knowledge projects and guide us toward modes of understanding social reality in ways that dismantle rather than uphold fixed identities and locations as the nodal points of power. (pg. 29)

Reflexivity, then, as understood from the above quotes, is an integral part of any feminist project as it allows the researcher to test their position against texts or persons with different positions.

**Intersectionality.** This notion of dismantling fixed identities and locations that Jalal (2013) highlights in the above quote is also captured in the concept of intersectionality. First introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article, ‘Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex’ (1989), she further developed the concept in her oft-cited, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’ (1991). Since then, intersectionality has spurred an entire subfield of feminist theory, with ongoing debates over its conceptualization, application, utility, and limitations. In ‘Mapping the Margins’, Crenshaw proposed intersectionality as a way to address the frequent conflation and erasure of ‘intragroup differences’ in identity, which she found particularly problematic in the case of violence against women, as ‘the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class’ (pg. 1242). In the article, she explored ‘the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color’ as a way to
highlight ‘the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed’ (pg. 1244-45).

**Approaches.** Intersectionality has since come to be defined in various ways. It is understood as ‘the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination’ (Davis, 2008, pg. 67), or, more broadly, ‘the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations’ (McCall, 2005, pg. 1771). As Walby (2007) points out, intersectionality ‘is a relatively new term to describe an old question in theorization of the relationship between different forms of social inequality’ (pg. 450). As the concept has developed over the past few decades as an analytical tool, intersectionality has been used in diverse ways, leading to both controversies and confusion. As Davis (2008) explains, ‘some suggest that intersectionality is a theory, others regard it as a concept or heuristic device, and still others see it as a reading strategy for doing feminist analysis’ (pg. 68). Such a range of understandings and applications are a result of intersectionality’s open-endedness, or what some would critique as vagueness and lack of coherence (McCall, 2005). Yet, despite the uncertainties generated, such inherent ambiguity ‘may be the very secret to its success’ (Davis, 2008, pg. 69). For Davis, ‘intersectionality has precisely the ingredients which are required of a good feminist theory. It encourages complexity, stimulates creativity, and avoids premature closure, tantalizing feminist scholars to raise new questions and explore uncharted territory’ (2008, pg. 79). Elsewhere, Davis elaborates on this view of intersectionality, asserting that

a good feminist theory would not end the confusion once and for all, but would allow us to attend to and critically analyse the multiplicity of divisions and inequalities. It would open up space for critique and intervention, while enabling us to be reflexive about the range and limitations of our own theoretical enterprise. (2011, pg. x)

Davis’ definition of ‘good’ feminist theory echoes Butler’s and Scott’s (1992) view that feminist theory needs to ‘generate analyses, critiques, and political interventions, and open up a political imaginary for feminism that points the way beyond some of the impasses by which it has been constrained’ (pg. xiii).
Another defining feature of intersectionality, along with its open-endedness, is its complexity and it is these two features that lend it toward a wide array of applications and contribute to its popularity, as well as create methodological problems and limit its usefulness (McCall, 2005). As intersectionality has expanded the subject of analysis ‘to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis’, it has created ‘unique methodological demands’, given how ‘research practice mirrors the complexity of social life’ (pg. 1772). To address this issue, McCall delineates ‘a wide range of methodological approaches to the study of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations’ and describes three approaches which ‘attempt to satisfy the demand for complexity’ (pg.1773).

The three approaches—what she calls anticategorical, intercategorical, and intracategorical complexity— ‘are defined principally in terms of their stance toward categories, that is, how they understand and use analytical categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life’ (pg. 1773). While anticategorical complexity deconstructs analytical categories, the intercategorical approach adopts existing analytical categories, using them strategically ‘to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions’ (pg. 1773). The intracategorical approach lies between the other two: like the anticategorical approach, ‘it interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself’ (pg. 1773). And like the intercategorical approach, ‘it acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories’ (pg. 1774). As McCall explained, the intracategorical approach is especially useful for studying ‘particular social groups at neglected points of intersection… in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups’ (pg. 1774). Or, as Dill (2002) puts it, ‘people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups’ (pg. 5).

Debates surrounding how to approach analytical categories lie at the heart of the varying positions scholars have taken regarding how to apply and modify intersectionality and whether it is
a useful concept at all. While some scholars find the anticategorical approach’s exclusively deconstructionist method to be problematic (hooks, 1992; Mohanty, 2003), Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik (2011) remind us that ‘one of the insights of post-structuralism is that identity categories (gender, ‘race’, etc.) cannot be understood in an essentialist way’ (pg. 8). Yet, ‘the power effects generated by these categories are profoundly inscribed in historical and societal terms and, by virtue of the numerous overlaps between them, form the basis for the hierarchisation of groups and the formation of unequal social relations’ (pg. 8). This observation led Spivak (1985/1995) to argue for the need for what she called ‘strategic essentialism’—the subaltern’s ‘strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’ (pg. 214). (Because of the ways in which the concept has been misunderstood and misused, Spivak has since distanced herself from the term, though not necessarily the concept.) For Mohanty (2003), the anticategorical approach and its outright rejection of categories simply goes too far, discarding valuable knowledge produced through identity categories:

…the critique of essentialist identity politics and the hegemony of postmodernist skepticism about identity has led to a narrowing of feminist politics and theory whereby either exclusionary and self-serving understandings of identity rule the day or identity (racial, class, sexual, national, etc.) is seen as unstable and thus merely ‘strategic’. Thus, identity is seen as either naive or irrelevant, rather than as a source of knowledge and a basis for progressive mobilization. (pg. 6)

As part of these ongoing debates, other scholars have taken up similar projects as McCall’s three approaches, proposing various iterations of intersectionality to offer both greater conceptual clarity and transparency regarding how they use it. Prins (2006) introduced the distinction between constructionist and structural understandings of intersectionality, taking as her starting point the fact that ‘all identities are performatively produced in and through narrative enactments that include the precarious achievement of belonging’ (pg. 277). She proposed that ‘the constructionist approach to intersectionality, with its account of identity as a narrative construction rather than a practice of naming, offers better tools for answering questions concerning intersectional identity formation than a more systemic intersectional approach’ (pg. 277).
Ferree (2011) has taken a similar approach, using the term ‘interactive intersectionality’ which emphasises ‘its structuration as an ongoing historical process from which neither structure nor agency can be erased’, highlighting the influence of Giddens’ (1990) structuration theory on her thinking. Ferree builds on the ‘dynamic and institutional understandings of intersectionality’ proposed by McCall (2005) and Hancock (2007), an approach which ‘sees the dimensions of inequality themselves as dynamic, located in changing, mutually constituted relationships with each other from which they cannot be disentangled’ rather than ‘identifying points of intersection (pg. 55, emphases in the original). Ferree went on to explain that this ‘dynamic’ intersectionality insists that it cannot be located at any one level of analysis, whether individual or institutional. The ‘intersection of gender and race’ is not any number of specific locations occupied by individuals or groups (such as black women) but a process through which ‘race’ takes on multiple ‘gendered’ meanings for particular women and men (and for those not neatly located in either of those categories) depending on whether, how and by whom race-gender is seen as relevant for their sexuality, reproduction, political authority, employment or housing. These domains (and others) are to be understood as organisational fields in which multidimensional forms of inequality are experienced, contested and reproduced in historically changing forms. (pg. 56, emphasis in the original)

In conversation with these ideas, Walby’s (2007) complexity theory proposes the notion of co-constructed social systems as a means to theorise the intersection of multiple social inequalities. She distinguished between two kinds of social systems at play: institutionalised domains (economy, polity, violence, civil society) and sets of social relations (such as gender, class, and ethnicity). For Walby ‘each set of social relations is a system’ which are ‘overlapping, non-saturating and nonnested’ (pg. 460). For example, ‘gender is not contained within class relations; they are not nested. Gender relations are a separate system; it overlaps with class, but neither gender nor class fully saturate the institutional domains’ (pg. 460). As Ferree further explained,

In such a complex system, gender is not a dimension limited to the organisation of reproduction or family, class is not a dimension equated with the economy, and race is not a category reduced to the primacy of ethnicities, nations and borders, but all of the processes that systematically organise families, economies and nations are co-constructed along with the meanings of gender, race and class that are presented in and reinforced by these institutions separately and together. In other words, each institutional system serves as each other’s environment to which it is adapting. (2011, pg. 56)
Building on these notions of intersectionality as dynamic, interactive, and co-constructed, Ferree proposed an additional emphasis of discourse ‘as a political process by which this co-creation occurs’ (pg. 56). Drawing on Foucault’s work on categorisation and ordering (1966/2005) and the relationship between power and knowledge (1977), Ferree’s anti-categorical and discursive approach ‘rests on understanding the co-formation of knowledge and power, stresses the historical development of institutions that shape consciousness and practice, and identifies discourse as a crucial arena of political activity’ (pg. 56). Paying attention to discourse and its constituent processes of categorising and ordering reveals how ‘we use categories and ranks not only to understand but to control the world’ (pg. 56). She went on to explain:

As lists, ranks, metaphors and distinctions proliferate, they guide our understanding of who we are and with whom we are more or less related. Thus, for example, when the dimension of ‘race’ is constructed and ‘fixed’ in national censuses, it generates meaningful and contestable categories (such as ‘Asian’) which can always be further decomposed, but which serve to distribute real resources and recognition in response to which identities and activities become oriented. (pg. 56-7).

Following Ferree, I understand intersectionality as dynamic, interactive, co-constructed and discursive. Before utilising this understanding to approach my cases in their contexts and texts, I should first explain how and why religion should be inserted within intersectionality.

**Religion in Intersectionality**

Mainstream feminism has, by and large, neglected to engage with religion, particularly the religiosity of women. As Salem (2013) noted, ‘the silence around feminism and religion is a profound one…[it] functions to highlight not only a difficulty in approaching the subject of female autonomy in relation to religion, but also indicates a negativity towards religion on the part of feminist scholars’ (pg. 10). According to Bilge (2010), the extent to which feminist scholarship has considered religion, it has generally ‘denounced religion as an intrinsically androcentric and oppressive institution’ or ‘equat[ed] religion, particularly Islam, with pre-modernity, tradition and backwardness, and feminism with modernity and secularism’ (pg. 11). The ‘vexing relationship’ as Mahmood (2005) characterized it, between feminism and religion is particularly pronounced with
Islam, due in part to the ‘historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with... “the West,” and to ‘challenges that contemporary Islamist movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part’ (pg. 1).

Some scholars argue that contemporary discussions of Islam tend to not be fully conceptualized, failing to capture its dynamism. Such discussions often rely on tropes and stereotypes, associating, for example, Wahhabism with Saudi Arabia, Sufism with North Africa, and Shi’ism with Iran, while the reality of Islamic practice is much more diverse and complicated in these and other regions. Furthermore, as Salem (2013) and others insist, there is no singular Islam; thus, it is open to interpretation and to diverse experiences and identities among practitioners. Salem argues:

The implicit or explicit assumption that ‘Islam is patriarchal’ not only assumes that there is an ‘Islam’ but that patriarchy has already been predefined—but by whom? Many discussions that revolve around patriarchy and religion assume an essentialised version of Islam that simply does not exist in the lived realities of Muslim women. As soon as a text interacts with its reader or listener, the outcome is an interpretation that will differ from other interpretations. (pg. 3)

Engaging in the debates surrounding whether to speak of ‘Islam’ or ‘Islams’, which are really about how to make sense of the diversity, complexity, and contradictions within the religion, including the range of definitions and meanings given by its practitioners, Ahmed (2016), grounded in Islamic theory and cultural studies, took on the ambitious project of creating a postcolonial ontology of Islam. With his tour-de-force, What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic, Ahmed offered a reconceptualization of Islam as a ‘human and historical phenomenon’ (pg. 73). He aimed to portray ‘what Islam has actually been as a matter of human fact in history’ (pg. 1) in order to ‘provide a new language for the conceptualization of Islam that serves as a means to a more accurate and meaningful understanding of Islam in the human experience—and, thus, of the human experience at large’ (pg. 108, emphasis in the original). By ‘identifying the coherent dynamic of internal contradiction’ (pg. 108), he formulated a conceptualization of Islam as a ‘theoretical object’ (pg. 108) which can contain the multitude of incongruities, paradoxes, ambiguities, and widespread
diversity that have exemplified Islamic thought and practice for over a millennium by being understood as what he called ‘coherently contradictory’ (pg. 301-302). Thus, he ultimately rejected the notion of ‘Islams’ in favor of the singular, concluding that

The fact that there exists a vast human community constituted at the level of the individual by an intimate sense of commonality in the meaningfulness of a something/ somehow that is experienced in all its diversity and difference as Islam is another way of saying that Islam, and not merely Islams, is, quite simply a theoretical, experiential, affective, affinitive, and semantic reality for Muslims. (pg.148)

In his review of Ahmed’s book, Ali (2017) agreed with Ahmed’s argument that ‘being Muslim’ has changed significantly over the centuries and can thus be conceptualized as both ‘coherently contradictory’, but also suggested that Islam could simultaneously be considered ‘coherently dynamic’ (pg. 308). These frameworks of Islam as ‘coherently contradictory’ and ‘coherently dynamic’ can also be explored through intersectionality, which is seen by some feminist scholars as one way to address the pitfalls that mainstream feminism and other scholarship have fallen into in their analyses of religion, particularly Islam—namely, the Orientalist tendencies of such scholarship which portrays Islam in essentialist, static terms (Ahmed, 2016; Salem, 2013) and Muslim women as lacking agency (Bilge 2010; Mahmood 2005; Salem, 2013).

Given the aim of intersectionality ‘to listen to the voices of women and men on their own terms, in order to piece together narratives and unpack experiences that can help in understanding social life’ (Salem, 2013) an intersectional approach to religion has the potential to make productive interventions. According to Salem, intersectionality’s emphasis on narrative can ‘provide space within which religious women can speak and not be confined to certain narratives…allowing religious experiences to be part of the narrative, because those speaking are setting the narrative’. Yet, intersectional research has been slow to incorporate religion. While an abundance of scholarship has emerged over the years that uses intersectionality to examine a wide range of identities and positionalities, particularly race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality, religion
remains a neglected domain in intersectional theory and methodology (Bilge, 2010; Mahmood 2005; Salem, 2013; Weber, 2014).

Nevertheless, recent scholarship has offered both useful theoretical discussions of how intersectionality could be effectively applied to the study of religious identities and positionalities as well as examples of fruitful applications. Such scholarship offers ways to produce more nuanced accounts of the meaning of religion in people’s lives and to clarify how religion interacts with other identities and positionalities to produce varied life experiences. For Salem (2013), the feminist tendency to label religious women as victims of false consciousness or ignore them altogether reveals the key tension of the ‘unwillingness to engage with religious women on their own terms, instead of the a priori assumptions of religious patriarchy that rely on the homogenization of religions’ (pg. 5). She proposed that ‘conceptualizing religion as a positionality may prove a useful way of doing research that does not a priori reject the experiences of religious women as patriarchal’ (pg. 5). For Bilge (2010), intersectionality’s location within postmodernist and post-structuralist feminist theoretical traditions as well as its attendance to socio-historical processes, social relations, and structures that produce power and privilege enable it to make important interventions regarding the agency of religious women, such as Muslim women who wear *hijāb*. As she explained, it does so by challenging mainstream feminist interpretations of the practice as a non-agentic act of either subordination or resistance:

Given that intersectionality provides a critical lens to analyse articulations of power and subjectivity in different instances of social formations (economic, political, social and cultural), an intersectional approach to agency, informed by the poststructuralist deconstruction of the humanist subject, would insist that there is no ontological priority of agency to context, and would turn its focus instead to specific contexts and articulated social formations from which different forms of agency and subject positions arise. (Bilge, 2010, pg. 24)

In her study on the Germany-based Aktionsbündnis muslimischer Frauen (Action Coalition of Muslim Women; AMF), a group of Muslim women who have both an explicit affiliation with Islam and engage in gender justice activism, Weber (2015) used intersectionality to examine the racialization of religion and secularism in Germany as well as affective attachment to faith. She
concluded that including faith and religion in an intersectional analytical framework ‘provides a fruitful strategy for considering action for and progress towards gender justice in Germany today. In terms of contribution to forms of marginalisation, gender, faith, and racialization often play overlapping roles’ (Bilge, 2010, pg. 33).

Other studies on religion using an intersectional framework have revealed nuanced variations among religious practitioners. Nyhagen and Halsaa’s (2016) comparative study of Christian and Muslim women in Norway, Spain, and the UK uses interviews to explore intersections between religion, citizenship, gender, and feminism. Acknowledging the subordination of women practiced in the religious traditions and institutions that their respondents are drawn to, the authors asked: ‘How can we understand this from the point of view of religious women themselves?’ (pg. 1). Their book challenges the tendency of mainstream feminist movements and theories to marginalise religion and see the religiosity of women as an obstacle to their emancipation. In doing so, it contributes ‘towards a feminist acknowledgement of the role that faith plays in contemporary women’s lives. Rather than looking at how religious institutions view women’s rights and gender equality, we examine what religious women themselves say about citizenship, gender equality, women’s movements and feminism’ (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016, pg. 2).

Discussions with research participants about their own identities in relation to marriage, motherhood and family, work and education, nationality, citizenship, and religion uncovered significant variation regarding a number of dimensions of their religiosity. Participants reported various routes taken to their faith, religious engagement, and identity, whether born into it, becoming religious over time, or experiencing moments of religious insight and devotion. Participants also revealed a range of ways of practising religion in everyday life, whether as a way of life or cultural practice or habit; and an array of constructions of their religious identities and other intersecting identities in relation to self and community. While for some, their religious subjectivity was foundational—a ‘root identity’—for others, it was a taken-for-granted, compartmentalized aspect of identity. For many, ‘their subjectivities are largely constituted not only
by religion but also by gender, nationality and other identity aspects’ (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016, pg. 71). Yet, ‘other participants talk about their religious identities as one among multiple identity aspects and as such do not single out religion as being of greater importance in the hierarchy of identity categories’ (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016, pg. 71). The relational aspects of their religious identities contribute to the notion of faith as a form of belonging.

With recent trends showing religion as an increasingly salient positionality, intersectionality research on religion is all the more important. Recent scholarship shows how narrative constructions of religious identity are deeply intertwined with notions of belonging, as Nyhagen and Halsaa’s (2016) work revealed. Yuval-Davis (2011) pointed out that some social dimensions may be more important than others in specific historical situations, but some social locations, including gender, age, ethnicity and class, ‘tend to shape most people’s lives in most social locations’ (pg. 201).

Arguably, the increased salience of the social location of religion is due in part to the increasing politicization of religion in recent years, particularly Islam. Religious identity and positionality become absorbed in what Yuval-Davis (2006) called the ‘politics of belonging’ which create and maintain boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The above studies focus on Muslim women within Western contexts that attempt to defy the assumptions of mainstream feminism towards religion. Yet what about Arab feminism? Where does religion fall in theorisations from Muslim women in predominantly Muslim contexts? And how is Arab feminism’s relationship with religion is understood? This will be the focus on the next section where I will first discuss the history of Arab feminism first.

Arab Feminisms: A Reevaluation

Most studies of Arab feminisms create a dual periodization. The first period is ‘the past’ (the most generally agreed upon beginnings) which is from around the early to shortly after the mid-20th century, a time when the Arab lands were under Western colonialism before being divided into nation-states and the emergence of nationalism as a form of resistance against colonialism. On the other hand, the ‘contemporary’ is marked by the Middle East’s reencounter with the West in the
21st century through major events like the 9/11 attacks in the US in 2001 and the ‘War on Terror’ that followed, as well as the Gulf Wars (1990-1991 and 2003-2010), which featured coalitions of forces from Islamic states led by the US. Certainly, there are studies that discuss women and their status earlier in history, but these moments are the most-often-compared and most discussions are focused on these two. Thus, Arab feminisms have been documented for more than a hundred years.

In this section, I will shed light on how contemporary critics reflect on past feminists’ writing and activism to reevaluate them through the existing literature to better understand their present condition. Critics today have utilised modern theories such as Orientalism and postcolonialism in their perception of these feminist texts.

Generally speaking, there is no consensus on many issues related to Arab feminism, beginning with definitions and terminology, to its manifestations; critics try to answer such questions that resonate in both its past and present, including whether it is unified or regional; whether it is authentic and indigenous or derivative of Western feminism; whether it is secular or secularist or Islamic or Islamist; whether it is effective and popular or elitist, marginalised, and resistant; whether it was initiated and led by women or men; and whether it has shown feminist ideological independence (particularly through its participation in the production of feminist knowledge). This is not an exhaustive list of disagreements on interpretations of Arabic feminisms. Scholars and theorists have attempted to produce different angles of interpreting its history using interdisciplinary research. For example, because of the influence of Orientalist studies and postcolonial theories, critics emphasise the necessity in historical and geographical contextualising and problematising of Arab feminisms according to the socio-political atmosphere of the time to avoid sweeping homogeneous generalisations.

In the interplay between Western colonialism, nationalism, and modernist interpretations of Islam, Al-Golley and Arenfeldt argue that ‘feminist thinking’ is commonly believed to have ‘preceded the term feminism’ (Al-Golley & Arenfeldt, 2012, pg. 13). This is not exclusively
regarding Arab feminisms but worldwide. However, to answer the question of when feminism began in the Arab world, Badran and Cooke, in their introduction to their anthology of Arab feminist writings, write that the first publication using an Arabic name equivalent to ‘feminism’ is Al-Nisāʾīyāt (which is the derivative adjective of the Arabic word for women); it was written by Malak Nassif in 1909. The book’s name and its content carry a feminist agenda. However, they also argue that the first women identified as ‘feminists’ with a sensitivity towards its connotations and its political use (as they were French-educated) were the women who established the Egyptian Feminist Union under the leadership of Huda Shaʿrāwī; they replaced the word ‘women’ with ‘feminist’ because they were the first to perform the public political act of removing their veils as a symbol of objection to women’s seclusion in 1923. However, Badran and Cooke insist that there was a ‘feminist discourse’ in the writings of Arab women that can be traced back to the 1860s. Women wrote about and discussed their relationship with modernism and other issues of the time, like segregation and the veil, in the 1890s salons. Leila Ahmad (1982) contends that the first political act led by Huda Shaʿrāwī was to support a nationalist cause against colonialism rather than a feminist one. This leads to their empowerment to later pursue other demands exclusively related to women. Hence, Arab feminisms’ initial emergence was the result of the infusion of a number of factors, mainly Western colonialism, nationalism, and Islamic modernism. These factors impacted different contexts in the Arab region differently because colonialism exercised various degrees of oppression across the region (Badran & Cooke, 1990, pg. xxv).

In fact, colonialism along with its associated modernism had a huge impact on the region, and on women in particular. Some researchers now problematise the various ways that colonialism affected women through stereotyped presentations, language, history, gender roles, education, and laws and whose effects extend beyond the colonial period because of how they intersected with other ideologies such as nationalism and Islamism.¹ For example, colonialism both propagated and

¹ Each time I write or read the word ‘Islamism’, I feel that it would be more appropriate if replaced with ‘extremism in interpreting Islamic texts’ because ‘Islamism’ would easily be conflated in the
reinforced normative gender roles by enforcing the importance of girls’ education for the ‘domesticity and motherhood roles of women’ which represents the value system of the ‘cult of true womanhood’ that prevailed in the West during the 19th century (Keister, 2011, pg. 228). Regarding education, Greenberg, who studied the educational opportunities provided for Palestinian women by colonial schooling, noted that they were provided differently according to gender, class, religion, and geographical differences (2011, pg. 13). Working-class girls were taught domestic skills like laundry, home economics, sewing, and cooking because they were expected to become wives and mothers and were not expected to pursue their education beyond elementary stages, and were taught by teachers from other colonies. Upper- and middle-class girls and women, on the other hand, were taught by specialists from abroad as a way of marketing these kinds of schools to the middle- and upper-classes who were keen that their daughters acquire Western skills to equip them for their future careers. Christian girls enjoyed better educational opportunities than Muslim girls. This domestic learning was employed as part of the nationalist discourse to classify women who master it as ‘independent’, ‘noble’ and ‘reasonable’ (Greenberg, 2011, pg. 134).

Omniah Shakri reaches similar conclusions in the Egyptian context about the employment of European modern definitions of femininity to define motherhood and put women in the service of the men and family and in the service of the building of the nation. Recent reevaluations of Amin’s Liberation of Women and The New Woman show how Amin echoes such modernised notions of gender roles (Ahmed, 1982). There was also indirect Western influence on Arab women through Western travelogues and the Arab reformers who traveled abroad on scholarships. Ahmed (1982), for example, argues that some reforms in the Middle East adopt the image presented in Western travelogues which states that the oppression of women in the region is the reason for its

---

mind of the reader with Islam. Islamism has shifting meanings throughout its literature. Actually, it was first coined by the French philosopher Voltaire in mid-18th century to simply means Islam and it carried none of the contemporary other ideologies associated with it now (Kramer, 2003). Nowadays, it connotes extremism, religious fundamentalism, the political utilisation of Islam or ‘militant’ Islam.
backwardness and the one area that needs urgent reform. She also argues that another source of influence was established because of contact with the West through sending young people to Europe on scholarships. For example, a group of young men calling themselves ‘Young Turks’ sought to establish contact with the West by opening embassies in Europe and sending their young men there, who by the 1820s had already been acquainted with the languages and arts. For Ahmed then, calls for the emancipation of women, which started in the last decade of 19th century in Turkey, were raised by Young Turks in contact with the West as part of a reform strategy. These were then echoed by women. The nationalists’ call for educating women was with a view to each woman becoming ‘a good mother, a good wife, and a good Moslem’ (Ahmed, 1982, pg. 155). This is one example which shows how religious identity was utilised at one point of history by nationalists in their call for education meant to move the nation towards modernism and this coincides with calls for social and religious reformism.

Social reformers in the Muslim world wanted to present themselves as forward thinking by embracing women’s emancipation, especially in front of the West. Ahmed (1982) cites Atatürk’s public attack on women’s veils as an example of this. At the same time, she emphasises that some, like Qasim Amin, have reached the same conclusion—that women are indeed oppressed—out of an informed study of their own societies. For Ahmed, therefore, Arab feminism is a Western import that did not grow out of the region but was brought in by male nationalists and reformers. Badran (2009) agrees that Arab feminism relies on the discourse of reformism, but she draws attention to the role of Muslim reformers like Muhammad ’Abdu who advocates a modernist reading of Islam. However, she argues that there is a fundamental difference between men’s pro-feminist agenda and the feminism that women advocate, because it is women’s feminism that stems from their own observation of their societies and their oppressed situation (2009, pg. xix). Mervat Hatem stresses

---

2 This contradicts her denunciation of Amin’s work in her famous book *Women and Gender in Islam* where she insists that he should not be considered the father of feminism but ‘the son of Cromer’, because he preaches a western form of patriarchy where the education of women is in the service of the happiness of men.
the importance of challenging the myth that men played a role in the liberation of women because this gives more value to the voice of men than that of women despite women’s action during the same period. Works by pro-feminist male writers like Amin or al-Tahtawi were romanticised; a close reading of their texts reveals stereotypical portrayals of women as gossip lovers and lazy creatures. Their writings also devalue the so called ‘women’s traditional roles’ and the time women spend looking after their children, houses and husbands (Hatem, 1993, pg. 6).

Hatem draws attention to the work of Beth Baron which documents the other forgotten voices of women’s press at that time which present women’s views as early as 1892 although most of them support the ‘new modernist definitions of femininity’ (Hatem, 1993, pg. 7). Taymour’s study[^3] *Natā’ij Al-A’hwāl fi al-ʿawāl wa Al-ʿa’jāl (The Consequences of Changing Speech and Actions)* from 1887 provided another point of view on the backwardness of the society that male nationalist reformers advocated; that it is not because of women’s backwardness but because of ‘the corrupting practices of some forms of dynastic government’ and this what needs reform (pg. 7). She was also one of the first women to present her *ijtihad* regarding *quwwāma* by connecting it to responsibilities and providing good role models in the family rather than holding a privileged position. Hoda Elsadda also points out how Malak Nassif’s work represents a critique of these male voices, seeing them as imposing a new oppressive force on women and silencing women’s opinions by not taking them into account in matters related directly to them. Nassif advocates phasing out the veil and the notion that men should be educated on how to relate to unveiled women before women begin this process in order to avoid unnecessary aggressive reactions from the public. So, both Nassif and Taymour are early manifestations of Islamic feminism and are debated within the historiography of Arabic feminism for having voices that provide their own distinctive views which are framed within Islamic references.

Badran, in *Feminism in Islam* (2009), examines the feminisms in the region for four decades and emphasises that Middle Eastern feminism is indigenous, and centred on and led by women—

[^3]: She is in fact considered one of the first Islamic feminist figures before the term was coined.
both Islamic and secular—though she distinguishes between two forms of feminism throughout her analysis. She writes in her introduction:

I chose the subtitle Secular and Religious Convergences to draw attention to the presence of what is conventionally understood as both ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ within the feminisms that Muslim women have created. The juxtaposition of these two feminisms illustrates how ‘the religious’ constitutes a vertical thread in the history of Muslims’ feminisms, as does ‘the secular’ in the worldly or quotidian sense, and reveals the multiple valences of the terms ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ and how their meanings, and our grasp of them, change over time. Indeed, there is significant recent interrogation and debate about how ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ are constituted as seen in the work of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and others. Terms such as secular feminism or Islamic feminism, which are necessary for purposes of identification and analysis, can be, and indeed sometimes have been, understood in ways that are rigid, reductive, or misleading, and frequently have been deliberately manipulated for political ends [...] Examination of concrete experience indicates how Muslim women as feminists employ multiple discourses and possess multiple identities, and how secular feminists and Islamic feminists have worked together, and do so increasingly, to achieve shared goals. (pg. 11)

In her review of the book, Sherine Hafez (2011) argues that Badran’s insistence that Arab feminisms ‘originate in the region and are not imported from the West’ is a kind of defence against the accusation that feminists are in collusion with an agenda to Westernise the region and rebel against Islamic customs and cultural traditions (pg. 115). Hafez also critiques the idea that Arab feminists develop their own form of feminisms independent of the Western influence out of their engagement with ‘Islamic modernism and secular nationalism’ (pg. 116) because Badran does not problematise her use of the term ‘modernity’. She does not provide a ‘genealogy’ of ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’ and how they have shifted and evolved. For Hafez, Badran fails to sufficiently contextualise and problematise the relationship between ‘the intersection of nationalisms, Islamisms, and feminisms’ on the one hand and the ‘modernities’ that emerged out of them on the other and how ‘restructurings of complex historical trajectories’ were employed by those feminists (pg. 116). Furthermore, it should also be noted that many critics (like Badran and Hafez) focus their attention on the shifting meanings of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ but not specifically on the evolving meanings of ‘Islamic’ or ‘Islamism’.
Because of such accusations of connections to the West, Arab feminisms, have become an overly self-conscious discourse, preoccupied with self-definitions and struggles for legitimacy (Al-Ali, 2000). Recent studies in Arab feminisms are concerned with matters of authenticity. Depending on how authentic they are, women’s movements have been classified into ‘secular’ (adhering to Western values) or ‘Islamic’ (framed within the Qur’an and Sunnah). Many critics, including Ahmed and Badran, have attempted such a categorisation, claiming that the former was dominant at the beginning of the 20th century, while the latter has dominated over the last few decades. Al-Ali argues that ‘this strict separation between the ‘modern, secular and westernising voice’ on the one hand and the ‘conservative, anti-western and Islamic voice’ on the other obscures ‘the overlappings, contradictions and complexities of discourses and activism that took place against a ground of anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggle’ (Al-ʿAli, 2000, pg. 58-59). Huda Shaʿwrai, for example, although from the upper classes and French-educated, did not abandon Islam but ‘[acted] within and [reacted] against a complex web of solidarities and alliances’ (Al-ʿAli, 2000, pg. 59). In her review article of Arab Feminisms and earlier in her book Contemporary Arab Women Writers, Anastasia Valassopoulos stresses that the question is not whether Arab feminisms were influenced by the West or were locally-rooted because both influences were always present in their discourse; the question is how ‘to close the circuit of influence’ (2007, pg. 16). This is possible, she argues, by ‘a revolving and evolving cycle that informs as well as transforms the ideas of Western and other feminisms’ (pg. 16, emphasis in the original). This way, instead of being a passive recipient of influence, Arab feminisms would employ foreign influences to their own advantage by experimenting with them and modifying them to suit their own unique context. Such experimentation with theories and ideas would also enlighten other feminisms of their efficacy within an Arab context. This would change the direction of the influence into a give-and-take instead of being unidirectional.

Critics have examined early Islamic feminists’ use of religious references and whether they were merely strategic. Ruth Woodsmall (1936) writes that Shaʿrāwī ‘carefully based her demands
for social reform on the spirit of the Koran and has not promoted reforms which do not have Islamic sanction’ (as cited in Ahmed, 1982, pg. 22). For example, her claims for equality of education for girls have been based on the teachings of the Koran; similarly when protesting against polygamy she recognised the exceptions for polygamy which are granted by the Koran (adultery, childlessness and incompatibility).⁴ She explains that ‘this policy of maintaining a careful balance between Islamic teaching and social reform, which is followed by Madam Sharawi and the Feminist Union is dictated more by political expediency than by religious conservatism’ (Woodsmall, 1936, as cited by Ahmed, 1982, pg. 160-161). To Ahmed (1982), this, whether done out of ‘conservatism’ or keeping with decorum, was ‘essential’ or unavoidable in order to follow the dominant discourse to avoid being questioned in terms of Islamic zeal or Arab identification but was not helpful to feminism. Such a strategy risks reinforcing ‘the fundamental assumptions of the culture’ (Ahmed, 1982, pg. 161). Ahmed also argues that, while ‘Western women can be radically critical of their cultures’, Arab feminisms are keen to be seen as loyal to them to such an extent that they embrace patriarchy (pg. 161). This puts pressure on Muslim women to remain silent and not criticise their own societies for fear of being seen as disloyal. This makes them recede to being defensive or apologetic: ‘caught between those two opposing loyalties, forced almost to choose between betrayal and betrayal’ (Ahmed, 1982, pg. 163).

Seen from another angle, it has been argued that these attempts to stress Arab feminisms’ indigenous origins were the result of the awareness of the politics of Orientalism and its misrepresentation of the East. They evoked the reaction of occidental studies and the call to ‘the indigenisation of social science’ (Al-Ali, 2000, pg. 24). Such calls carry other serious drawbacks: ‘nativism’ develops its own kind of oppression. Blank criticism of the West misdirects attention

⁴ No similar exceptions were stated in the Qur’an but they were the ‘ulama’ interpretations and *ijtihad*. The Quran states the condition of justice between co-wives and at the same times states that fulfilling this condition is impossible.
towards other social, economic, and political reforms or reality and can be employed in the same ways that imperialism was used to stress religious, among madhāhib, and social differences (Al-Ali, 2000).

Moreover, Al-Ali (2000) argues that this attempt to indigenise the Egyptian movement ‘may work at the expense of glossing over the complexity of cultural encounters during and after colonisation’ (pg. 24). Thus, she suggests focusing such critical attempts at new paths that see the encounter with the West not only as a form of resistance- ‘confrontational and exclusive’- but also a potential for ‘creativity’ and ‘incorporating’. She notices that some are beginning to take new directions toward exploring these notions. Examples include Baron’s studies of women’s writings in the press in the 20th century (1997) and Nelson’s documentation of Doria Shafik’s life (1996). It can be added that earlier feminists also used to write about the experiences of other women from different cultures without reservation. In studying the feminist writings of Arab women in the early 20th century, Buthaina Shaaban writes:

Although regular coverage was given to the experience and achievements of Western women, all these journals stressed the necessity to learn from women's movements in the West without giving up what is positive in Arab culture and Muslim religion […] European, U.S., Chinese, Indonesian, and Indian women appeared regularly in these journals, as well as biographies of great women, both European and Arab. The accounts of non-Arab women, in general, never conveyed the slightest feeling of prejudice against Western women or against their style of life. Most of these articles stressed the necessity to benefit from the experiences of other women without losing sight of Arab history, culture, and religion (2003, pg. 11).

Nationalism, then, played no minor role in Arab feminisms, a fact that critics attempt to uncover. As mentioned earlier, some nationalists propose that women’s advancement was mainly (but not exclusively) out of Western influence based on a Western modernist perception of femininity. Nationalism plays other roles. Some critics show how patriarchal states control, shape, and modify gender relations in the society and focus on the relationship between feminism and states and nationalist projects. Women were exploited by nationalist projects shortly after decolonisation because they were encouraged to participate in the process of liberation and were then pushed back from power and decision-making circles after independence; an oft-cited example
is Algerian women, but this applies to other contexts as well. Algerian women were seen as bearers and preservers of authenticity and traditions (Ahmed, 1982, pg. 164). This explains the resistance to education for nearly 36 years under colonialism. Men opposed unveiling to protect their privileged position in the home and the French wanted to humble men by encouraging the removal of the veil. It was only during fighting for independence that removing the veil was tolerated by nationalist men for the sake of winning the struggle. Women returned to their ‘traditional roles’ after liberation and then their rights and freedom were hijacked (Ahmed, 1982, pg. 165).

Arab feminism is put in the ambivalent position of ‘[working] with [the state’s patriarchy] and against it’ (ambivalence that matches the state’s own contradictions towards women as both ‘victims of social backwardness, icons of modernity or privileged bearers of cultural authenticity’ (Kandiyoti, 1991, pg. 431). Al-Ali points out that Kandiyoti means that women fall between two forms of nationalism: one ‘civic’, the other ‘cultural’. The former focuses on their duty as equal citizens to contribute to nation building. The latter focuses on their role in preserving culture. These same feminists’ alliance with nation-states as agents of change that would support women’s causes led to conflict with the subsequent generation of feminists. They saw it as a contradictory stance because at times the states controlled and co-opted women’s activism.

Some argue that women need the state because it makes their activism unified. ‘Secular Nationalism’ was in a way an advantage that unified and organised women’s movements. For example, the Egyptian Feminist Union was first set up because it focused on a nationalist project; its attention was fighting colonialism, Western exploitation and oppression, and achieving liberation. They also directed their concerns to a common cause, i.e. the Israeli occupation. However, Arab feminisms started to divide after political events like the Camp David Accords and the First Gulf War (Abou-Olba, 2004). Zaatari (2014) stresses that feminisms have never been cohesive and were always prone to class divisions and regionalism.

How effective were those feminists in their early stages? Some argue that there were some achievements on the level of calling for educating women, joining the work force, and equality at
time when civil status laws were being formulated after independence. In this, feminism played ‘a major role,’ argues Kaltham al-Ghanim (2014, pg. 152). According to Ahmed (1992), Huda Sha’rawi’s Union in the 1920s and 30s had small successes in obtaining free education for women: ‘it was partly their efforts which secured women’s entry into university’ (pg. 160). However, they completely failed to reform Islamic family law. Some of the things Sha’rawi called for like restricting polygamy was contested by ‘ulamā’ from Al-Azhar University.

Al-Oraimi (2014) summarises the following reasons as those that prevented a ‘revolutionary’ Arab feminism (pg. 134) from existing: Decolonisation and the political complexities in its aftermath demanded unity and marginalise women’s issues. After liberation, women receded to old ties with ‘family, tribe, party authority and society’ (pg. 136). Because of this dependency, state feminism arose concerned only with upper- and middle-class women and neglecting the working class. The rise of religious movements focusing on jihād and a ‘shortcoming in interpretation of socio-religious texts’ formulated a homogenous view towards women. Imperialism played a vital role because it disconnected Arabs from their history, presenting it as backward. This affects women because they do not see inspiration in their own history (Al-Oriami, 2014, 136). This may explain why so many writings have tried to revive the historical accounts of the roles played by women in Islamic and

Arabic history as sources for inspiration.

**Arab feminisms now: New dilemmas and old fronts.** A century after decolonisation (if that was ever completely achieved) and modernisation (if it was ever actually achieved), Arab societies face new troubles that stretch even further after the overthrow of four regimes in the Arab region (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya) as a result of the eruption of a series of Arab revolutions—the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. Neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism in the name of the ‘War on Terror’ have been hugely significant political phenomena directly affecting women as they seek legitimacy from the notion of ‘saving women’ (Abu-Lughod, 2008). This has worsened the situation of women as they are now confronted with new challenges such as
fanaticism and differences among madhāhib. Al-Oraimi (2014) attempts to summarise the situation in the Arab world as follows: traditional values collapsed and economic and political systems because complicated and a neo-patriarchy which controlled feminist organisations emerged. Women are always exploited as productive supporters of men, not as equals. Others, like Mernissi (1991), argue that women were given rights in the public domain and at work but denied them inside the family. Women became ‘state projects’ which integrate women as a show to support the legitimacy of its authority. The social system views women and their roles as complementary to family which needs to be intact to maintain the community’s wellbeing. Many feminists need to work against women’s internalised submissive beliefs imposed in the name of tradition and culture. Women feel that their responsibilities are doubled, inside and outside the house, and their submissiveness is also twofold as they become the object of men’s tyranny (who are subject to state’s tyranny) and state’s authoritarianism. According to Mernissi (1991), it is (and was) impossible for women to affect change because of deterioration in the Arab political and economic situation where they can hardly have any impact in state-monopolised power, just as women earlier in history faced the double oppression of colonialism and their patriarchal society.

Indeed, one of the dilemmas that feminist researchers face is why Arab feminism is still unable to generate public support and why some are working under certain political systems. Though women’s non-governmental organisations have spread at an unprecedented pace, they are far from enjoying popular support. Many of these NGOs are questioned because of their funding and whether they are under obligations to follow certain agendas or whether they are independent and free. One useful study by Haifa Zangana (2014) shows how Iraqi NGOs were funded in the US and spread there just before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and how they help the women working in them to ascend to power in the new corrupt government and do nothing to improve women’s status in society as a whole. These NGOs colluded with the American occupation because they helped spread the American message that ‘women need to be saved’.
Ablah Abu-olba (2004), in her attempt to answer this question of the disparity between feminisms and the public in an interview, sheds light on Palestinian women’s movements and how they are losing touch with the reality of Palestinian society because they have started to make demands (like equal inheritance which contradicts the Qur’an) which have evoked violent reactions from the people towards feminist movements, and distracted attention from the real problem facing women where most in rural areas are denied their inheritance altogether. Instead, Abu-olba argues, they should use a more realistic tone, emphasising what is granted to them in the Qur’an.

Some Arab feminists project Western feminists’ solutions into Arabic contexts, which has proven futile just as it is equally futile more broadly to apply foreign solutions to local issues. Ahmed (1982) shows how Kemal Ataturk was the first to use religious arguments to enforce secular ideas and to win the people’s support. When he tried to change family status laws and give this mission first to group of ʿulamāʾ whose verdicts did not correspond with his agenda, he then abolished the family law based on Islam altogether and replaced it with one employed in Switzerland in 1926; but because this was imposed on people from above, people in rural areas simply did not abide by the new rules that prevented polygamous marriages. The state was ultimately faced with the problem of a large number of unregistered citizens born from these marriages. Similarly, when Pahlavi of Iran banned the veil, women went back to the veil as a symbol of rebellion against his rule.

Another possible reason behind the limited impact of Arab feminism in spite of its long history is that the old demands of liberation are diminishing and others which are related to religion have risen or tried to take over (Al-Ghanim, 2014, pg. 153). This, however, is a simplistic analogy because, as has been shown earlier, religion was not totally absent from earlier Arab feminist movements, if not at times at the heart of it.

Zeina Zaatri (2014), who compares Arab feminisms in the past and present, argues that it was a ‘popular social movement’ with political and conceptual progress at the beginning of 20th century until 1970s, but that Arab feminisms have now retreated because they become a ‘rights
movement’ which make them lose popular mobilisation and public support, becoming divided and weakened with no social or political impact because democracy was not established by the new states.

The other reason for the retreat of Arab feminism according to Zaatari (2014) is the process of modernisation which, she is convinced, is not a Western project but one that thrived after the end of occupation to help in state-building through the emphasis of individualism and citizenship and concepts like the new woman who participates in such a project as an individual. Modernism relies upon the discourse of international human rights which was complicit in its early stages with double standards; for example, the launch of the Human Rights declaration in 1948 coexists with the dispossession of Palestinians and eradication of their rights with the help of international powers, causing the United Nations to lose its legitimacy in the eyes of Arabs in the Middle East. When feminist discourse relied heavily on this humanitarian discourse to claim rights, Zaatari (2014) argues, it lost public support. What is also wrong with the human rights discourse is the failure to point out ‘the dividing line between individual and collective rights, and individual and group formation’ and ‘the boundaries between the rights of one individual and another’ (Zaatari, 2014, pg. 57). Moreover, this discourse is a tool, not an end in itself, because it is changeable over time and less effective in forging change than popular mobilisation. Feminism, Zaatari (2014) suggests, should speak within societal norms (a strategic and timely tool that could be modified according to the political social atmosphere). This way of making demands is more acceptable to the public.

In spite of some successes gained in regard to the call for education and work, Al-Ghanim (2014) also argues that there is no ‘feminist awakening’: we ‘cannot say that Arab women are experiencing an awakening’ (pg. 153) because of increased illiteracy among women due to the political tension in the area, honour crimes that are still occurring in urban areas, and the of lack of impact among other professional social groups like lawyers, doctors, etc. She also points out that, in societies in the region where women gained their political rights early, like Lebanon and Egypt,
there has been no real significant political activism or participation such as a significant presence in parliament.

It is saddening that feminists and critics still need to defy a misrepresented image of women in the Middle East generally and Muslim women especially years after the development of Orientalism because of the spread of attacks by extremists who claim to do it in the name of Islam, and the new politics that the West adopts towards the region in its legitimisation of the ‘War on Terror’ and the spread of Islamophobia.

**ISLAMIC FEMINISM: TRENDS IN ITS THEORIZATION**

Since studies on women in the Middle East gained momentum, they have been burdened with diverse arguments attempting to theorise the status of women in relation to Islam, gender, and other sociopolitical-historical issues. One such rising attempt to explain women’s relationship to Islam is Islamic feminism, itself the subject of much debate among critics. In this section, I will review the state of the literature on Islamic feminism, with the aim of clarifying overall trends that have been established for the benefit of understanding the field as a whole. I will outline the main debates and arguments surrounding this new trajectory by offering comparison of the critics’ stances towards it and shedding light on their methodologies or theoretical frameworks when debating for/against Islamic feminism. Particular attention will be directed towards how theorists define Islamic feminism and what factors are contributing to its rise. In the process, I will offer my evaluation and critical response to these works and my own conclusions.

**When and Where is the Beginning?**

Among the early critics who observe the newly emerging concept of Islamic feminisms are Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Margot Badran who have cited the late 1980s and the early 1990s as the date for the coinage of Islamic feminism (Badran, 2013). Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006), for example, speaking about the Iranian context in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, declares that the rise of this new theory was in the late 1980s after the ascent of political Islam to power. Muslim Iranian women needed to find for themselves a space and language to share
in the struggle and to engage with the sacred texts; they adopted an unapologetic and critical stance towards patriarchal narratives attributed to Islam that had tried to hijack their gains after the revolution. This allowed them to reclaim rights based on gender equality and justice and to abandon the anticolonialist-nationalist voice that laid claim to their activism and, at the same time, ensure that these demands were not to be rejected by Islamist discourses of the time. Mir-Hosseini (2006) argues that Muslim women have created a feminism that speaks about their own needs. For her, it is neither derived from nor affected by Western forms. Thus, Mir-Hosseini is describing an Islamic feminism created out of this specific time and place.5

Cooke (2001) also traces the beginnings of Islamic feminism back to the Iranian magazine Zanān, founded by a group of female gender activists whose orientations are Islamically referenced and unapologetically feminist (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Contradictorily, Moghissi (1999) points out that such feminism does not grow from the soil of Muslim majority societies or, at least, is not the articulation of Muslim women living there; instead, it is the product of ‘diasporic feminist academics and researchers of Muslim background living and working in the West’ (pg. 126).

Badran makes a similar observation about the rise of Islamic feminism within immigrant communities as well as Western converts to Islam. This new concept helps them to address the challenges they face in living Islam in majority non-Muslim contexts (Badran, 2006). On the other hand, Badran also, like Mir-Hosseini, identifies it as an indigenous movement, not affected by Western feminism. She declares that Islamic feminism was preceded by a feminism that appeared in the late 19th century, which she identifies as ‘Feminism with Islam’; it intertwines its arguments with the Qur’an as a validation of their reclaiming of ‘Islamic, humanistic, nationalistic or democratic demands’ (Badran, 2006). Then, in the 1990s, Islamic feminism emerged, its discourse is based exclusively on the Qur’an.

5 Mir-Hosseini also describes how a nearer moment in history marked by the war on terror helps in the persistence of the movement. This will be discussed in another section about the factors that help in the rise of Islamic feminism.
Badran, moreover, argues that the term had already been circulating in diverse locations in the world (not only Iran) and was utilized by various scholars by the mid-1990s (Badran, 2006). Some of the earliest places where the term was employed were Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Morocco, South Africa and Turkey (Badran, 2006). Ultimately, in 1999, Badran proposes that ‘the term Islamic feminism should be retained, firmly claimed and repeatedly explained’ (Badran, 1999). She argues that, because women interested in these issues face a ‘conundrum’ of defining their work, they would now at last find a unifying banner and analytical discourse under which to articulate their activism.

**What is Islamic Feminism?**

Omaima Abou-Bakr (2001) warns against such arbitrary categorisation as it may lead to the isolation of those who do not use Islamic texts from Islamic or Muslim feminism. Indeed, such demarcations trap women in limited spaces whose boundaries, rules of inclusivity and exclusivity are only imaginary. Abu-Bakr has also brought to light an important observation related to the mechanism of naming and conceptualisation which ‘says a lot more about the observer, the person who coins, than about the object itself’ (pg. 1). We should bear this in mind when approaching the stance and definition of any of the critics and how the definition, rejection, or acceptance of the term and the theory depend on the writer’s understanding of ‘Islam’ (and all words derived from it, like ‘Islamic’ and ‘Islamist’) on the one hand and ‘feminism’ on the other.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate to look closely at Badran and Cooke’s (1990) definitions of the concept first because they both can be regarded as among the first advocates of the theory in its early days. To begin with, Cooke’s (2001) understanding of feminism and the signifier ‘Islamic’ shapes her theory. She understands feminism as an epistemology, a frame of mind and attitude. Therefore, it serves the purpose of providing ‘analytical tools’ that would entail changing ‘states of consciousness’ (Cooke, 2001, pg. ix, x) and this is not bound to one culture. In her reply to Moghissi’s (1999) rejection of Islamic feminism as being oxymoronic, she sees in Islamic feminism
a potential that falls between secularist and misogynist polarised views of Islam. Cooke (2001) therefore contends that

Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning …. a new, complex self positioning that celebrates multiple belongings. …not … a fixed identity but … a new, contingent subject position. (pg. 59)

She accords the word ‘Islamic’ the status of bridging the two poles of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islamist’ identifications; this position is ‘adopted by someone who is committed to questioning Islamic epistemology as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it’ (Cooke, 2001, pg. 5961, emphasis in original). This can explain why, in her book Women Claim Islam (2001), she has classified writers as varied in their outlook towards Islam as Al-Ghazali and Elssadawi as Islamic feminists based solely on their writings. This is possible for her because of the way she defines Islamic feminism. In this definition, Islam is only contextually related, which means that it writers like Elssadawi can be read as ‘questioning Islamic epistemology’. This is not because Elssadawi rejects Islam but because it helps her understand it; therefore, Elssadawi’s critique is also Islamic if the context is also taken into account, in Cooke’s view. Moghissi’s (1999) rejection of the new conceptualisation is affected by her own understanding of Islam as inherently misogynist and, thus, she juxtaposes Islam with Islamism and feminism with Western secularism (Cooke, 2001). Badran defines Islamic feminism in Feminism and Islam as ‘a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence’ (2013, pg. 242).

It is noteworthy that both writers retain the word ‘feminism’ in this new trajectory seeing that it is futile to replace it with another because such attempts would lead to using same word. Badran, like Cooke, sees feminism as ‘a mode of analysis’ that provides tools useful for recognising and fighting forms of gender injustice. Moreover, neither critic considers feminism a Western enterprise.
Islamic Feminism.

Raja Rhouni, in her book Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatimah Mernissi (2010), problematises Islamic feminism through the deconstruction of Badran’s and Cooke’s definitions in particular and Islamic feminist practice and content in general. Her problem with this project is in the word ‘Islamic’ because it carries within it what she calls ‘foundationalism’, which she explains as ‘the postulate of Islamic feminism, which also constitutes its paradigm, that gender equality is rooted in the Qurʾan’ (Rhouni, 2010, pg. 17). To her, this is one of the limitations in articulating the theorisation of Islamic feminism because it would bring the project to a ‘dead end’. She suggests taking Islamic feminism to a ‘post-foundationalism’ space which ‘deconstructs any essentialist definitions of the word ‘Islamic’. Rhouni is particularly critical of the term ‘Islamic paradigm’ in Badran’s definition and Cooke’s interpretation of the word ‘Islamic’ as a defence of ‘faith position’ (Rhouni, 2010, pg. 29). In Badran’s phrase, Rhouni alludes to the complexity of identifying the parameters of such a paradigm. While some critics of Islamic feminism differ in their interpretations of gender relations in Islam as those of equality, equity, or complementarity, others have disputes over what is regarded as equality or justice. This may lead to a distortion in the essence of the theory.

Cooke’s definition of the term is more essentialist, explains Rhouni, because, firstly, it excludes non-Muslim secular feminists from this project and, secondly, it simplifies the complex concept of ‘faith’ (Rhouni, 2010). Many women, she notices, who are associated with Islamic feminism were victims of accusations regarding their faith. Therefore, she proposes, inspired by Arkoun’s anti-essentialist position towards Islam, an ‘i’slamic feminism. He spells Islam with a small ‘i’. Rhouni summarises his usage of the term and what it implies as follows: writing that ‘islam’ per se allows him to problematize both the essentialist construction of ‘Islam,’ written with a capital letter, by what he refers to as ‘Orientalist Islamology’ and political science, on the one hand, and the canonical construction of ‘Islam,’ also with a capital letter, by orthodox Muslim theologians and jurists, who refuse to consider its plurality and open-endedness. Arkoun argues that the two ideological constructions do not take into consideration the
sociocultural construction of belief and its metamorphosis throughout history. He criticizes the term ‘Islam’ because it glosses over an immense era in which abound the most diverse and the most irreducible ethnic and cultural groups, languages, systems of belief, sociological and anthropological structures of imaginaries, and collective memories. In this depiction, he continues, Islam becomes ‘un monstre ideologique’ (an ideological monster), which serves to operate the polarization Islam/Orient versus West/secular/democratic/modern. Written with a small letter, ‘islam’ refers to ‘une formation religieuse parmis d’autres et ses diverses manifestations dans l’histoire’ (a religious formation among others and its diverse manifestations in history). (Rhouni, 2010, pg. 36)

Similarly, ‘islamic’ in Rhouni’s theorisation is neither a ‘monolithic’ nor a ‘hermetic’ modifier. It allows for fertilisations from and of other religious feminisms. In fact, Rhouni’s real contribution to the theorisation of Islamic feminism is that she sees no real difference between speaking from a secular or islamic position depending on her definition of the terms ‘islamic’ and ‘secular’. I have already described what she means by ‘Islamic’. Let us now move on to describe what she meant by the latter. She differentiates between the ‘secularist’ and the ‘secular’ critic. The former is the one who adopts a ‘militant-like’ position, to use her words, and a ‘fundamentalist’, to use Mir-Hosseini’s, in his opposition towards religion while the latter is, as Bruce Robins defines it, is the one who ‘submit[s] to no authority’ (1994, cited in Rhouni, 2010, pg. 36). Seen from these angles then, the terms ‘islamic’ and ‘secular’ are not contradictory or in opposition in their essence. Anybody can adopt both positions without being banned from the Islamic feminism arena. Therefore, she calls for a ‘post-foundationalism’ in Islamic feminism’s theorisation by abandoning the search for truth and authenticity to which many islamic feminists fall prey, as her critique of Mernissi’s work conveys, because they assume an essentialist approach to Islam. A contextual approach which uses modern human sciences tools and methods would be a better substitute because it helps ‘complicat[ing] political and ideological instrumentalizations of religious texts’ (Rhouni, 2008, pg. 114). This would lead to the process of expanding methodological ways to engage with traditions, especially those related to fiqh because they are products of human ijtihād. This does not mean going into a process of denial of traditions, but of engaging in dialogue with them. However, there are cases where excessive criticism has led to rejection of Islam altogether,
such as the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a critic of Islam and a feminist of Somali Muslim origin (Hirsi Ali, 2013).

‘Islamic feminism’ by another name. Fatimah Seedat (2013) also finds Badran’s definition and the whole project of naming the intersection between feminism and Islam ‘Islamic feminism’ problematic. Inspired by Badran’s insistence on calling Barlas’ work such and the latter’s rejection of this categorization, she declares that ‘Islamic feminism’, named and defined as the Islamic version of Western liberal feminism, is more in the service of feminism than Muslim women and their work towards gender equality (Seedat, 2013). This is because ‘the project to define Islamic feminism may be read as an attempt to define and fix Muslim women against the dominant narrative of a patriarchal Islam and in the interests of an inclusive feminist paradigm. Similarly, for Badran, the alterity of Muslim women is a valuable addition to other feminist struggles’ (Seedat, 2013, pg. 37). Turning a blind eye to feminism’s association with the colonial past and present Western liberalism and the presentation of feminism as a gender consciousness or analytical discourse is merely ‘incomplete reading of feminism’ (Seedat, 2013, pg. 34). Her views on feminism echo those of Barlas which I will discuss in more detail in the next section. Seedat’s contribution to the field stems from her seeing Islam and feminism as two distinct paradigms of thought that have their own different histories of reasoning and intellectual traditions. On the basis of such a viewpoint, she suggests an alternative paradigm to Islamic feminism which she identifies as ‘a feminism that takes Islam for granted’. Her argument reads:

To claim a necessary single convergence precludes other convergences and other ways of being Muslim and feminist. While the feminism of an Islamic feminism must inevitably locate Islamic feminism in a Western intellectual paradigm, the feminism of an Islam taken for granted allows for feminism to be located in an alternate history of reason; it may argue equally for a historically located Muslim gender consciousness or an androcentric Muslim past. Against the glare of the Enlightenment and the association of feminism with a Western history of reason, the latter possibilities are much harder to see, but discerning their potential and noticing their presence, even in blurred outlines, is the beginning of translucence. (Seedat, 2013, pg. 44)

Seedat, in other words, argues that Islam has a different reasoning to that of feminism, which derives its own from Western philosophies and concepts such as the Enlightenment and human
rights discourse, to articulate the project of women’s liberation. This calls for the challenging task of finding a place for their own work in the space in which feminism (derived from Western origins) has already occupied and which shaped the vocabulary and tools of women’s liberation, making it difficult to articulate one’s difference without using the feminist discourse already established by Western academia. This entails the risk of assimilation, applying similar solutions to totally different situations. Moreover, the adherence to the already dominant forecloses the possibility of imagining other potentialities. Seedat insists that any theorisation pertaining to the union of Islam and feminism should ‘recognis[e] different ways of being, different applications for feminist methods, and the possibility of maintaining these differences’; and more importantly, ‘These alternatives could ensure the value of difference and allow it to endure’ (Seedat, 2013, 44). She identifies that critics like Barlas, Wadud, Ahmed, and Mernissi are working in these directions and along these lines:

Barlas and Wadud locate an equality analysis in the text of the Qur’an and the model of the Prophet. Mernissi offers a feminist analysis of Islam that connects to a history of Muslim thought and a non-Western history of reason when she explains that the quest for dignity was always a part of the history of Muslim women. Similarly, Mir-Hosseini explains that, though there is no equivalent term for feminism in Persian, ‘as a consciousness it has always existed’ (Seedat, 2013, pg. 39)

It is true that Ahmed is one critic who highlights using the discourse of feminism in legitimising colonialism. She is also among those critics who are skeptical of the idea that Islam improves the status of women, but they were better off in some areas. Because Seedat’s critique was inspired by Barlas, it is relevant to discuss Barlas’s reasons for her rejection of being labelled an Islamic feminist.

Muslim believer, not a feminist. Barlas's rejection stems from her vision of feminism as a ‘Western master narrative’:

My resistance to feminism stems not from its central premise that women and men are equally human and deserving of equal rights, but from two facts: First, I dispute the master narrative of feminism that claims this insight as a peculiarly feminist discovery. In my own

---

6 This idea was initiated by Robertson Smith and Montgomery Watt. Then a number of feminist scholars adopted it, like Nikki R. Kedde in her book, The Past and Present of the Muslim World.
case, for instance, I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur’an. In fact, it wasn’t until much later in my life that I even encountered feminist texts. But I do owe an intellectual debt to feminist theorizing about patriarchy and for having given me the conceptual tools to recognise it and talk about it. Second, it seems to me that, for the most part, feminism has secularized the idea of liberation itself such that feminists often assume that to be a believer is already to be bound by the chains of a false consciousness that precludes liberation. (2001, as cited in Rhouni, 2010, pg. 30)

A third point about which Barlas feels uneasy regarding feminism is its call for using common ‘shared’ language and how this ‘create[s] analytical and political problems’ (Barlas, 2001, as cited in Rhouni, 2010, pg. 19) because it glosses over the specificity and diversity of Muslim women’s movements. Feminism in this sense is ‘inclusive’, ‘imperialising’ and ‘reductive’ to other ways of gendered beings. A fourth point against feminism in Barlas’ argument is that she sees Islamic feminism as an attempt at ‘provincialising’ feminism - a concept she borrowed from Chakrabarty’s book Provincializing Europe (2008). Feminism as a universalising discourse could give epistemic ‘closure’ to other possibilities of identifications and defining (Barlas, 2001, as cited in Rhouni, 2010, pg. 21). Lastly, she questions the project of Islamic feminism: ‘do we redeem Qur’an by mapping feminism onto it? …Or do we redeem feminism when we locate it in the Qur’an?’ (Barlas, 2001, as cited in Rhouni, 2010, pg. 20).

Other critics, like Rhouni and Mir-Hosseini, observe that feminism should be retained by Muslim women working for gender equality:

Although some Muslim women feel uneasy with the term ‘feminism,’ I retain it because I believe that it is important to locate women’s demands in a political context that is not isolated from women’s movements and experiences elsewhere in the world. Feminism is part of twentieth-century politics, and only through participation in this global feminist politics can Muslim women benefit from it and influence its agenda. (Mir Hosseini, 1999, pg. 6-7)

Hosseini also praises the Iranian women writing in Zanān because they worked within their Islamic context and claimed the label ‘feminists’ and used Western sources unapologetically (1999, pg. 7).
According to Badran (2013), Islamic feminism is a proof that Muslim women can produce a feminism of their own and it refutes the claim that Islam is anti-egalitarian. Rhouni (2010) also points out that some critics reject feminism because it arouses fears of illegitimacy in their societies when their works are described as such; but, she insists, distancing one’s work from this label does not lead to an equal position when others analyse one’s work. It will always remain open to such labels and different interpretations.

Besides, ‘Islamic feminism should not focus exclusively on legitimacy nor define itself as a quest of authenticity. Instead, Islamic feminism needs to contribute to restore to Islam not its truth but its plurality and historicity’ (Rhouni, 2010, pg. 32). She adds that Islamic feminism might be read as an attempt to ‘decentre’ feminism from its assumed Western centre in parallel with black feminism (Rhouni, 2010, pg. 26).

**Looking for Indigenous Origins: Islamic Feminism and Legitimate Authority.**

Searching for Islamic feminism in Kuwait, Alessandra Gonzalez (2013) finds it helpful to apply the ‘theory of legitimate authority’ to clarify how can ‘progressive actors’ work ‘within conservative contexts’ (pg. 16). Building on Weber’s (1972) theory of the state’s ‘legitimate authority’, she identifies three factors playing the role of legitimation in Muslim majority contexts: ‘state, religion, and community’ which ‘are politically, theologically, culturally, and historically intertwined.’ (Gonzalez, 2013, pg. 16). She sees that this theory matches the realities of Muslim women living in Muslim majority countries and enables them to theorise a distinctive Islamic feminism that is more than just another version of Western feminism, neither desiring to imitate it nor envying it. Working within their cultural ‘constraints’, as Gonzalez puts it, embracing patriarchal assumptions serves the purpose of pushing for their demands and ensures being supported by their community’s legitimacy and approval (2013). This is a stance that is not unique to Muslim women, as she notes. Saba Mahmood documented how such a methodology was followed by evangelical women in the US in her book, *Politics of Piety* (2005). Seen from this
angle, Islamic feminism or any union between faith and activism is just ‘a means to an end’ (Gonzalez, 2013, 26).

Legitimisation has been implicitly understood as having negative connotations in the field of postcolonial studies because feminism was employed to serve colonial ends. Leila Ahmed, in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), has found that the discourse of oppressed Muslim women that have to be saved is used by colonisers ‘to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonised people’ (pg. 153). She also documented such colonial powers’ hypocritical stance in fighting feminists’ demands back home while pretending to call for Egyptian women’s liberation. Therefore, I find using the word ‘legitimate’ perplexing, although Raja Rhouni (2010) claims that questioning this stance, accusing it of underlying manipulation, is irrelevant and of no importance. However, Badran (2013) uses ‘legitimation’ mainly to differentiate between two movements’ agendas in the history of feminism in Muslim contexts and to classify the two as either secular or Islamic based on their utilisation of religion.

Badran’s (2013) argument explains that the early 1920s Egyptian movement led by Huda Sha’rāwī is described as secular because it did not articulate itself ‘exclusively’ on religious grounds and that it used religion only to ‘appropriate the discourse of Islamic modernism in a general way to legitimise its overall agenda and more specifically its campaign to reform the religiously based Muslim personal status code’ (2010, pg. 95, emphasis added). This feminism was very much affected by the writings of Muslim scholar reformers like Muhammad Abduh. To Badran, and probably to other critics, there is a clear distinction on how religious discourse has been employed in the two contexts. In this first case it is used as a means to societal reform and, in the second, it is meant to be directed towards religious reform.

Nayereh Tohidi, in her conclusion to *Women in Muslim Societies* (Bodman & Tohidi, 1998), declares that the idea of Islamic feminism naming itself is not of much importance compared to what has been achieved regarding religion-related gender equality work. She states that, no matter how it is described, ‘Islamic feminism is a grown and potent force that should be taken seriously. It
should be welcomed as one of the various voices and discourses present within the multifaceted identity of the women’s movement in the Muslim world’ (pg. 287, emphasis in the original). For her, Islamic feminism has a practical use for some women because it provides them with ‘workable formulae’ to face patriarchal practices in their societies and, thus, should not be ignored or entirely rejected. She moreover predicts that by ‘promoting change and women-supportive reformation, this voice would help democratize and, ironically, secularize Muslim societies’ (pg. 287).

Tohidi dismisses such a vision of Islam and feminism as being incompatible because it ‘contradicts the feminist quest for pluralism, inclusiveness, and diversity in women’s movements and in society at large’ (pg. 287). (It is noteworthy that the inclusivity of feminism connotes different meanings to Tohidi to those perceived negatively by Barlas.) Tohidi also calls for a middle path between ‘those who see Islam either as the primary cause of women’s subordination or as the only path for women’s emancipation’ (pg. 137).

Anastasia Valassopoulos (2010), in her review of five significant books published in relation to the topic of feminism and Islam, argues that it would be ‘problematic to restore women to their Islamic identity’ only (pg. 208). Women have multi-layered identities and many factors play their part in their living experiences, such as class, education and ethnicity. Besides, they are the products of various historical and socio-political contexts, which is manifested in the complex ‘ideological uses of an Islamic idiom and struggles over the role of Islamic law in state legal apparatuses’ (Abu-Lughod, 1998, as cited in Valassopoulos, 2010, pg. 206). Therefore, it would be inaccurate to speak of Islamic feminism as the only expression of feminism in Muslim majority contexts. This again will not be a single form of expression, but multifaceted Islamic feminisms.

Building on these previous attempts to understand it, I add that Islamic feminisms should also be considered within an intersectional framework and analysis where religion and religious identification is not the only focus but one of many experiences of women’s realities (just like race,
gender, sexuality, and class) each effect and is effected by other. Women embracing their religious identity should not be marginalised or classified as less feminist because of their views’ proximity to the religious paradigm. As such, I will discuss in the next section how I chose my case studies and analysed them with such an intersectional focus in mind.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

Because this thesis is interdisciplinary and my case studies are mainly autobiographical writings by Muslim women, I provide here a brief analysis of this genre. This will also explain the reasons behind my choice of autobiographical writings as case studies.

Women’s Autobiographical Studies

The essence of autobiographical writing is ‘literature of the self’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 14-15). This observation begs the following questions: What is the ‘self’? How is it constructed? And what or whom is involved in its construction? Ultimately, these are questions about subjectivity, and women’s autobiography in particular is now a ‘privileged site’ for examining ‘processes of subject formation and agency’ (Smith & Watson, 1998, pg. 5). Smith and Watson (1998) reflect that an interest in women’s autobiographical practices ‘as both an articulation of women’s life experience and a source for articulating feminist theory has grown over several decades and was acknowledged as a field around 1980’ (pg. 5). Two decades after their analysis, such interest has only continued to grow and expand in exciting, new directions as the genre intersects with changes to feminism and feminist theory, with women’s autobiographical criticism informed by influences from postcolonial and postmodern critical theories, intersectionality, and cultural studies, among others.

These theoretical influences in particular are worth exploring further, as, together, they have arguably shifted the field of women’s autobiography studies as well as autobiographical criticism as a whole. The antecedents to these influences included what would eventually be known as feminist standpoint theory, with an essay from Mary G. Mason (1980) informing much later theorizing of women’s autobiography (Smith & Watson, 1998). Titled ‘The Other Voice’, Mason’s essay argued
that ‘the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some “other”’ (pg. 210). As Watson and Smith (1992) explained, by recognising discourses of identity as heterogeneous, ‘we make a space in autobiographical practices for the agency of the autobiographical subject. In this space too, the autobiographical speaker may authorize an alternative way of knowing’ that is filtered through experience (pg. xx). As the field developed, women’s narratives would be increasingly recognised as sources for understanding gendered identity (Smith & Watson, 1998, pg. 11).

The intellectual turn towards postcolonial studies in the 1980s ‘provoked serious engagement with women’s status as multiply colonised in many parts of the world’ (Smith & Watson, 1998, pg. 15). These ‘theorists of difference’ began to ask: ‘Who is speaking? How are they already spoken for through dominant cultural representations? What must they do to be heard?’ and in so doing, they provided ‘the terms to articulate how dominant cultural values have been internalized by oppressed subjects’ (pg. 26). New, postcolonial forms of autobiographical writing emerged, such as Sommer’s (1998) discussion of testimonio, through which she pondered such questions as:

Is [autobiography] the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance and counterdiscourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography? (pg. 111)

As part of understanding the subjectivity of colonial subjects, postcolonial scholars have insisted that such scholarly work be ‘grounded in the locales and temporalities of specific colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial experiences’ (Watson & Smith, 1992, pg. xv-xvi). For example, in their collection, De/colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography (1992), Watson and Smith put together essays that, ‘in their different ways, ask what autobiographical processes are set in motion when this [colonial] subject struggles toward voice, history, and a future’ (pg. xvii). And in so doing, the collection aimed ‘to investigate the
heteronomous meanings of the “colonial subject” and to explore autobiography as a potential site of decolonization’ (pg. xxii).

As part of the recognition for the need to appreciate the ‘multiply colonised’ status of women and the contextualisation of colonisation and decolonisation processes in specific locales and temporalities, an insistence emerged from critical feminist theorists to read women’s autobiographical texts through an intersectional lens, realizing that ‘privileging the oppression of gender over and above other oppressions effectively erases the complex and often contradictory positionings of the subject’ (Watson & Smith, 1992, pg. xiv). Watson and Smith contended that ‘feminist [autobiographical] criticism needs to consider how gender intersects with other components that comprise identity’ (1992, pg. 41). As part of these debates, postmodern critiques of the subject, led by Judith Butler (1990, 1993), challenged the very terms of identity politics by insisting that social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, ‘are not things in themselves but historically specific social constructs, materially realized in the discursive practices of everyday life’ (1993, pg. 27). Such debates called into question what had been defining features of women’s autobiography, accusing them as reinforcing gender essentialism.

As postcolonial, intersectional, and postmodern theories challenged the constitution of the subject at the heart of women’s autobiographical texts, cultural studies challenged the text and form of autobiography itself. In its recognition of culture as a constantly negotiated site of conflict, cultural studies see in the popular form an opportunity to examine the constitution of subjects and their forms of resistance and thus embraces the reading ‘of all kinds of cultural production as textual’ rather than holding a narrow focus on ‘high’ literary forms (Watson & Smith, 1992, pg. 32). In doing so, cultural studies has opened ‘flexible spaces for the serious explorations of alternative modes of selfwriting…revitaliz[ing] discussions of many kinds of women’s textual practices’ (pg. 32). As a result, the autobiographical has become ‘an aspect of textuality rather than a narrowly defined generic practice about lives lived chronologically’ (pg. 32).
**Arab Autobiographical Discourse**

Returning to the notion of autobiographical writing as ‘literature of the self’ and the questions this observation poses about subjectivities and their constructions, the influences of postmodern, postcolonial, intersectional, and cultural theories on women’s autobiographical form and criticism force us to consider the importance of the cultural context from which autobiographic texts emerge.

As Anishchenkova (2014) wrote in her *Autobiographical Identities in Contemporary Arab Culture*, autobiographical writing is very sensitive – perhaps to a larger degree than other literary genres – to ideological shifts in a given society. It means that autobiographical production from different cultures and different historical periods reflects the changing conceptions of subjectivity peculiar to these localities at specific points in time. (pg. 15)

Given this observation, Anishchenkova (2014) insisted that ‘the constantly, and often violently, developing political and ideological landscape in the Arab world guarantees the continuous emergence of new modes of identity’, producing an Arab cultural identity that is ‘a highly complex construct, a hybrid of different cultural modes and traditional affiliations’ (pg. 15). Furthermore, the incredible regional diversity has meant that ‘local histories and cultural traditions have profound influence on how collective forms of selfhood are formulated’ as have urban, rural, and tribal forms of community (pg. 15).

The postcolonial period has dramatically shaped national identity, which, in turn, has impacted individual identity and Arab sense of selfhood, as reflected upon by the Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun:

Until now the individual was not recognized in the region. Tribes or ethnic groups were recognized but not the individual. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi exploited the conflict between ethnic groups and played one tribe against another. But now Arab revolts have been driven by individuals’ urgency for change. The concept of the ‘individual’ has been born during these revolts. At the same time, tribal structures and ethnic traditions will not simply disappear. Tribal culture will have to enter into a modern framework and that is very complicated but individualism is here to stay. (2011, cited in Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 14).
Given such distinctive routes to the development of the ‘individual’, Anishchenkova cautioned against easy comparisons between Arab and Western modes of selfhood, as well as ‘applying Western theory to Arab autobiographical texts, since Western theories of the self are based on Western cultural heritage and Western conceptualizations of human subjectivity’ (2014, pg. 15). This recalls Watson and Smith’s (1992) discussion of the history of autobiography and how the emergence of autobiography as a genre was imbued with a distinctive concept of self:

the term autobiography is a post-enlightenment coinage...traditional ‘autobiography’ has been implicated in a specific notion of ‘self-hood’. This enlightenment ‘self’, ontologically identical to other ‘I’s, sees its destiny in a teleological narrative enshrining the ‘individual’ and ‘his’ uniqueness. Autobiography also entwines the definition of the human being in a web of privileged characteristics. Despite their myriad differences, of place, time, histories, economies, cultural identifications, all ‘I’s are rational, agentive, unitary. Thus the ‘I’ becomes ‘Man’, putatively a marker of the universal human subject...’ (pg. xvii).

Arabic conventional autobiography emerged as a literary canon in the 1950s, ‘sharing numerous structural elements with American autobiography of the eighteenth century’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 20). This style of autobiographical writing was more historical than personal narrative, expecting the autobiographer to present himself ‘as a distinguished individual, and to portray a righteous persona preoccupied with documenting the story of his education, the development of his political consciousness, the details of his spiritual/ideological/scholarly journey and his encounters with other famous contemporaries’ (pg. 20). The insistence on emphasising historical events and minimizing the individual aspect of the writers’ life stories that characterized early Arab works of the genre ‘indicated the need to produce a justification of their autobiographical endeavors’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 23). In turn, this led to the emergence of an ‘apologetic tone’ in the introductions of these autobiographies, ‘which became an important narrative element of the genre, often outlined the autobiographer’s attempt to avoid accusations of self-indulgence and hedonism’ (pg. 23).

Along with this focus on historical and political events which downplayed the individual, the conventional Arab autobiography was marked by a distinctive narrative identity, ‘a clearly
delineated conception of self, in many ways comparable to the Western notion of the universal subject…the I of the narrator was formulated as a self-defined, self-knowing, and static construct’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 22), an indicator of the influence of Western autobiographical discourses on these early Arab autobiographies. During this period, the Arab autobiographical subject was one ‘who seemingly knows his essence, his personality, and his selfhood prior to the act of autobiographical writing’ (pg. 26).

Much of what defined the Arab autobiography up until this point would change, however, with numerous major historic events, that ‘created conditions for fundamental reconfigurations of identity discourses in Arab societies, urging a new means of autobiographical narration’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 28). Such events included processes of decolonisation and the constructions of postcolonial nationalism, the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, as well as Western cultural and economic influences, globalization, the rise of Islamism, and the emergence of secular and Islamic feminist movements. The fundamental changes in Arab society produced by these and other events during the 20th century ‘had a profound impact on both individual and collective notions of identity. Naturally, under these circumstances Arab autobiographical production continued to develop and search for novel modalities’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 28).

Perhaps the most notable development during this period was that of postcolonial autobiographical literature—‘works where the autobiographical construction is informed by continuous negotiations between colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial discourses on both thematic and linguistic levels’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 38). Many literary works during the postcolonial period focused on the construction of new national identities. Anishchenkova explains that in this context of anticoloniality and postcoloniality, autobiographical writings ‘renegotiates the complex triangular relationship between the individual, his community/nation, and the Western Other’ (2014, pg. 10). Therefore, new expressions of identity produced in the period of nation building. This is clearly seen in the Algerian context where ideological and cultural identity was and is still negotiated.
Anishchenkova noted a tendency within postcolonial and feminist studies to generalize postcolonial writing even as they attempt to recognise its diversity, such as by language or coloniser. To counteract this tendency, her approach examined ‘postcolonial autobiographical writing across geographical localities and languages, allowing us to observe a full range of metatextual discourses which participate in the autobiographical process’ (pg. 39). The varied colonial histories in the Arab world, along with the diverse cultural and religious contexts, social conditions, languages, among other factors, all arguably shape both the autobiographer and the autobiographical text. Thus, specificity and careful consideration of the local context in which the autobiographer writes is of utmost importance. To this end, I have constructed this thesis around autobiographical writings that speak to the local contexts of Islamic feminist writing, in an effort to illustrate the particularities of place and culture within the diverse theorisation of Islamic feminism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My theoretical framework is primarily informed by three sources: intersectionality (which itself is a product of postmodern and post-structuralist feminist theoretical traditions), Islamic feminism, and autobiographical criticism. I am not using intersectionality to highlight a specific set of categories within Algerian or Saudi society nor to mould my case studies into specific categories. I use intersectionality as Myra Marx Ferree (2011) proposed: a dynamic, interactive and coconstructed analysis. I utilise this understanding when approaching my cases in their texts and contexts. I also use it as an anticategorical and discourse-based approach. I make this choice because, first, categories, no matter how useful, can be always contested. Second, categories serve as ways of dominating, controlling, and fixing identities which, ultimately, cannot be fixed. Rather, by using an intersectional framework, I not only show how the identities of the Algerian and Saudi Muslim women activists and writers who serve as the case studies for this research are composed of different intersectional categories but also, and more importantly, how their feminist positions and writings may pose a challenge to the intersectional framework itself that I hope will help us to better understand their work, writings, and subjectivities in all of their complexity.
As discussed earlier, religion as a source of identity and social location among women remains a neglected area of intersectional inquiry, which reflects a certain antagonism with which many feminist scholars treat religious women, especially Muslim women. Muslim women who call for radical reform and gender equality are often met with skepticism within feminist movements until and unless they put aside their religious beliefs. Women with religious affiliations who share spaces with secular women are similarly met with skepticism, with secular women assuming that they could never understand one another, reach consensus, or even have fruitful conversation.

Intersectionality as a framework and methodology applied to the theory and practice of Muslim women’s activism offers the possibility of escaping the binary which presents Muslim women activism and writing as either secular or Islamic. By applying the concept of ‘connected differences’ to Muslim women’s activism, I will show that while their activism has elements of difference that make it distinctive, such difference is connected through and inspired by other forms of women’s activism. I will also show how Muslim women’s activism is intersectional, although such intersectionality is stressed at certain times more than others.

Intersectionality allows feminists the creativity and openness they need to engage in feminist research and analysis by emphasising that the goal is not to alleviate the confusion, as promised by following a regime steps of doing a research in a ‘correct’ way because there is no such thing in feminist research. Intersectionality highlights the complexity and the contradictory nature of our experiences but does not offer guidelines on how to do a feminism that can be systematically applied. It invites creativity as well as reflexivity and accountable ‘feminist inquiry’ (Davis, 2008, pg. 79). Ferree’s work on intersectionality and framing (2011) also helps me to pay close attention to how the intersecting categories themselves change when applied to the distinctive contexts of Muslim women’s activism in Algeria and Saudi Arabia. One of the issues that some feminists in Muslim majority countries use to differentiate themselves from Western feminists is their resistance to women’s individual rights as a master frame for feminist activism and their emphasis instead on
equity within society for the family as a unit. From an intersectional perspective, framing as a concept means that

‘rights’ (or ‘women’) is not a master frame that has a ‘real’ meaning that could ever be fully known or ‘correctly’ used, but is a more or less meaningful and discursively powerful way of speaking depending on the panoply of meanings attached to it. (Ferree, 2011, pg. 60)

Thus, for Ferree (2011), following Yuval-Davis (1997), the very meaning of gender inequality is not simply different across countries or contexts but is anchored in a history in which the boundaries and entitlements of racialised nationhood, the power of organised class interests to use the state, and the intersection of both of these with the definition of women as reproducers of the nation have always been part of politics.

An intersectional approach helps me on both levels: first, to reveal the intersecting historical, political, economic, and religious dynamics in the Algerian and Saudi contexts; secondly, to see how these dynamics contribute to, frame, and form the intersecting elements that constitute my individual case studies and their lived experiences narrated through their autobiographical narratives. As Smith and Watson (1992) asserted, ‘the axes of the subject’s identifications and experiences are multiple, because locations in gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality complicate one another, and not merely additively…Nor do different vectors of identification and experience overlap neatly and entirely’ (pg. xiv). Yet, as we have seen from feminist historiographic narratives, women in places like Algeria and Saudi Arabia have often been spoken of as a single category. Of course, it can be convenient to speak of women as a collective group but there are many axes or categories that make up Algerian and Saudi society and thus Smith and Watson’s above quote demonstrates that it is misleading to speak of ‘Algerian women’ or ‘Saudi women’ as a monolithic category. As Etter-Lewis (1996) insisted, ‘no single group can represent adequately the whole of women, nor can one voice speak for all.’ (pg. 1). In actuality, there are as many Algerian and Saudi Muslim women voices as there are Algerian and Saudi Muslim women.

One may ask if, in choosing an intersectional framework, I am contradicting the title of my thesis as it reflects a concern with identity-based points-of-view as illustrated by the terms ‘Islamic
feminism’, ‘Algerian’, and ‘Saudi’. My attempt here is to challenge the single axis analysis by utilizing an intersectional framework that, by definition, resists one-dimensional analysis and rather, understands the relational and connected categories of identity and systems of discrimination, inequality, oppression, and marginalisation. Intersectionality is not offered as an answer for all problems nor as a universal framework; rather, it sheds light on the limitations of a single identity perspective. For example, intersectional Islamic feminisms remain critical of Islamic feminism. My aim is not only to argue that Islamic feminism exists through my case studies but also to argue that Islamic feminism is co-constructed intersectionally. When women stress or reclaim their Islam, it is always portrayed as a complex part of their identity which is not isolated from the effects of other identity categories; therefore, it is intersectional. Intersectionality is not only a descriptive approach to axes of identity but a mechanism to understand how these categories intersect to give meaning to one other.

In her book, *In Search of Islamic Feminism*, Elizabeth Fernea (1998) recounted her journey throughout Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—including Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Israel, and Palestine—on a quest to understand how feminism could emerge or even thrive within an Islamic context. She found that the variety of practices in which Muslim women engaged and the array of ideologies those practices represented reflected each woman’s individualised aims rather than a unified set common to all. Those practices which Fernea identified as Islamic feminist because of their association with an Islamic agenda, which the women she met stressed was an integral component of their feminism, compelled her to reconsider what she has learnt about feminism in Western academia.

Knowing what to classify as feminist or Islamic feminist is especially challenging as the debates rage on regarding whether feminism exists in the Arab world, let alone Islamic feminism. There are ongoing disputes over whether feminism was independent or dependent on nationalism and nationalist movements; whether feminism has led to a real change in women’s conditions and in society with regard to gender equality; whether feminism is an imported or homegrown movement;
and whether it is elitist and exclusive or holistic and inclusive. Against the backdrop of these debates where the answers are still uncertain, I am searching for narratives of Islamic feminism within Algerian and Saudi contexts.

The problem with much of the previous research on Islamic feminism is that it tends to focus on certain types of women who the researchers imagine are religious or Islamicist, such as those who regularly attend mosque, are active in Islamic groups, or wear *ḥijāb*, or engaging in activities that are considered normatively religious in certain spaces like Egypt or Algeria, for example. Thus, such research only captures a certain type of religious women, depending on their appearance and practices. Yet, each context has different definitions about what is normative religious and what is considered to be extreme religiosity.

Once, I was discussing the Egyptian author Heba Raʿūf ʿEzzat with an Egyptian colleague who told me, ‘for you [meaning Saudi women], she is a liberal and role model; but for us, she is *ikhwān* [part of the Muslim Brotherhood], we are not like that’. Assuming that I considered her as ‘liberal’ just because I am Saudi was problematic to me because my colleague built her judgment on a predetermined view of ‘Saudi women’ and not my opinion. In fact, I by no means consider Raʿūf a liberal, but my opinion of her aside, my colleague’s statement illuminates how religious women are seen (or are expected to be seen) in different contexts. Yet, religious women whose appearances, practices, and/or beliefs exist outside of ‘the expected’ stereotypes (and a hegemonic image of how a Muslim woman should act) are often not deemed religious at all; their religion may be taken for granted or it may be secularised. Many theoretical writings seem to fail to adequately theorise or conceptualise women occupying a space outside the secular and religious binary and their corresponding stereotypes. Theorising outside of this binary to argue, for example, that Huda Shawrai is also religious and Zainab Al-Ghazali is also secular, each in their own way, is not easy after the established literature that tells us who is who. Even more difficult is the task of explaining

---

8 She is identified by many critics as Islamic feminist but she herself rejects strongly any association of her work with feminism.
in an intersectional way how some women relate to religion and how its significance in their lives results from how it intersects with other forms of identity. Or how and why, because of certain political or personal circumstances, religious identification is brought to the forefront and takes precedence over other identities without necessarily marginalising them. The revolutionary period in Algeria and Morocco provides one such example: Algerian and Moroccan women consistently insist that they participated in their respective revolutions in order to defend their country and to serve God, using the term *jihād*, although many did not understand its meaning at first (Baker, 1998; Vince, 2015). I think such a religious identification will always have an impact on how women understand feminism, gender roles, and equality and has to be taken seriously. I define Islamic Feminisms then as dynamic, constructivist, and discursive positions and practices by women who embrace Islam as part of their identities, experiences, and lived realities and therefore one of many categories like gender, race, class, and sexuality which are articulated and negotiated within contingent social formations. This understanding is neither theocentric nor categorical. It acknowledges the complexity and particularities of these women’s intersectional manifestations.

**Methodology**

My methodology entails a textual analysis of the writings of select cases of Algerian and Saudi Muslim women activist writers in order to identify the presence of forms of Islamic feminist practice and discourse in Algeria and Saudi Arabia. For my examination of Algeria, I conduct a case study of the Algerian Muslim woman writer Zuhur Wanisi, drawing on her 2012 autobiography as my primary source. In the case of Wanisi, I will focus on the intersections of religion, gender, politics, and culture in the colonial, postcolonial, Islamist, and postcolonial-post-Islamist periods. The latter two periods are also often referred to as before and after the Black Decade, or the Algerian Civil War, which lasted from 1992 to 2002.

For my examination of the presence of Islamic feminist practice and discourse in Saudi Arabia, I selected Manal Al-Sharif’s memoir published 2017 and her other online writings (her blog, Twitter, and Facebook), arguably an emergent form of autobiographical writing. Women’s
movements and organisations do not exist in Saudi Arabia like they do in Algeria, given the particular intersections of politics, religion, and law in the Saudi context. Because of the restrictions on women’s organising, much of the women’s activism in Saudi Arabia has moved online, which now boasts a robust online movement. Through Al-Sharif online campaigns which led to the proliferation of this kind of activism, I argue that a new kind of Islamic feminism is also being practiced through this eactivism.

**Thesis Overview**

In Chapter 2, ‘Islamic Feminism in Algeria’, I use Zuhur Wanisi’s autobiography and other writings as an example of an early manifestation of Islamic feminism in Algeria. Due to her deviation from mainstream feminist discourse (in both language—writing exclusively in Arabic—and frame of reference—distinctively Islamic) which reflects Western standards, she faced subtle forms of marginalisation and discrimination. I explain why she is an Islamic feminist and why she was marginalised despite being the first woman to serve as a minister and member of parliament in the Algerian government. Chapter 2 benefits from an intersectional framework to explain how politics, culture, and religion intersect in Wanisi’s life and give new meanings to Algerian identity, to Islam and Islamic reform, as well as to gender and race in Algeria. In Chapter 3, ‘Islamic Feminism in Saudi Arabia’, I apply an intersectional framework to Manal Al-Sharif’s memoir, *Daring to Drive*, alongside her online writing and activities as part of wider Saudi Muslim feminist online activities, practices, and writings in order to decipher whether such writings reveal a distinctly Saudi form of Islamic feminism and explore its contours.

Chapter 4, ‘Comparing Islamic Feminism in Algeria and Saudi Arabia’, compares the previous case studies in Chapters 2 and 3. I highlight the similarities and differences between the ways in which Muslim women write about and practice Islamic feminism in Algeria and Saudi Arabia through the lenses of representation, language, and love and marriage.
To conclude, I reiterate the central findings and arguments revealed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. I then discuss the contributions that these findings and arguments make to scholarly literatures in the fields of feminist theory, intersectionality, Arab and Islamic feminisms, and autobiographical criticism, and suggest possible paths for future research.
CHAPTER 2: READING ZUHUR WANISI AS AN ISLAMIC FEMINIST: INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF HER TEXTS AND CONTEXT; A LIFE BETWEEN TWO JIHADS, TWO REVOLUTIONS AND TWO WARS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter uses an intersectional analysis to explore the historical and contemporary presence of Islamic feminism in Algeria through the case study of Zuhur Wanisi\(^9\) and her autobiographical text in Arabic *Through Flowers and Thorns (A’br Alzohour wa Ala’shwaak)* (2012) and other writings. Scholars have claimed that, although Islamic feminism exists as a global movement and throughout the Arab world, it is conspicuously absent in Algeria (Gavroche, 2016; Mihalache, 2007). Wanisi herself does not identify as an Islamic feminist per se. However, through a close reading of her autobiography, other writing, and tracing the various roles she has played in public service—from teacher, revolutionary figure, and literary writer, to serving as the first woman minister and member of parliament in Algeria—I argue that she exemplifies Algerian Islamic feminism. In her advocacy on behalf of women and their rights, the ways in which she has written about women’s issues, along with her identification as a Muslim woman, embrace of Islam and Arabic language and culture throughout her life, and use of Islam to advance her feminist agenda, Wanisi has practiced and advanced her own specific form of Islamic feminism.

Through an intersectional analysis of Algerian history and Wanisi’s life and work, this chapter shows how political, cultural, and religious forces intersected in particular ways that shaped her life, work, writings, identity, and advocacy as a Muslim woman struggling for women’s rights. I begin with a discussion and review of the debates surrounding the notion of Algerian Islamic feminism. I then provide an overview of Algerian history, tracing the colonial, revolutionary, and postindependence periods and the important role that Islam and gender have played in each period, both culturally and politically, in order to situate Wanisi, her public service, and her body of work in their historical context. I then present my methodological approach, including a discussion of my

\(^9\) It is often written as Zhor Ounassi or as Zuhur Wunisi but here I follow the IJMES transliteration system.
choice in studying the case of Wanisi and her writings. Following this, I elaborate on Wanisi’s biography and body of work, particularly her autobiography, which serves as the primary text for my analysis. Finally, I turn to my analysis of Wanisi’s texts in order to build my argument that, in her life and work, she exercised a distinctive form of Islamic feminism, and therefore, through her, Islamic feminism has had a longstanding presence in Algeria.

**ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN ALGERIA**

I begin my analysis by attempting to answer the seemingly simple question: Is there an Islamic feminism in Algeria? In looking at the neighbouring countries, many studies acknowledge that Islamic feminism has become a reality in Morocco (Sadiqi 2003; Rhouni 2010; Pruzan-Jorgensen, 2011) and is ‘a pragmatic challenge to discriminating laws’ (Archer, 2007). In Tunisia, famous for its secularism and its progressive profile for women, especially in Western media, studies like the one conducted by Mashour (2007), reevaluating divorce and polygamy in Islamic law and court legislations in Tunisia and Egypt, advocate gender equality through Islamic laws and feminist ijtihād. Moreover, recent studies have focused more on studying Islamist women’s activism in these two countries10 (Abdellatif & Ottaway, 2007). Nonetheless, when Wassyla Tamzali, an Algerian feminist writer and lawyer, was asked in an interview ‘What do you think of Islamic feminism?’ she answered (her answer deserves to be quoted in full as it is representative of the dominant feminist narrative regarding Islamic feminism):

> It doesn’t exist. It isn’t possible. You can be a Muslim and a feminist, but you cannot do feminism with Islam. Firstly, the role of the religion is not feminism and nor is it democracy. One cannot want the religion to do that which does not correspond to it. The religion directs us towards spirituality or morality and you may be in favour of it or against. Feminism is something else. Feminism doesn’t speak of morality. It speaks of freedom.

We know that historically, to take the example of Christianity, it was necessary for the feminist movement to confront the Church violently to be able to move forward. For

---

10 This is not to say that Algeria has to be identical to Morocco or Tunisia because of their proximity or that Islam shapes women’s experiences similarly everywhere (Charrad, 2011). In fact, the three countries have various sociopolitical and historical conditions. Algeria experienced an Islamic revival in the 1970s, exemplified by the increase in the number of women wearing the veil and the spread of religious practice and values. The rise of Islamism, with Islamists winning in municipal elections in 1990, was unexpected as they were not believed to be a dynamic power by secular scholars and observers (Maddy-Weitzman 1997).
example, with abortion, with divorce. In a given moment, in the religion there is an obstacle that can only be overcome by getting out from beneath that conservative idea. Are you against polygamy? Then say you are against polygamy, say ‘I am a Muslim but I am against polygamy because my conscience is opposed to it’. One should not say that polygamy is the result of a bad interpretation of Islam. However the Muslim feminists take up an old discourse that we already saw in the 70s to explain the place of polygamy in the Koran and to say that it does not exist.

Their labour of interpretation was already carried out in the 70s, and in the 30s everything was explained. Linguistics was also called upon, and all the modern media, to try to understand what was written in the Koran, so as to extract those elements in favour of women. Why was this done? To be able to touch those women who believed in God and the religion. And it was necessary to talk to those women, to argue with them. But from the moment that there were no further steps to take, it was decided to leave the religion aside, because Islam cannot be reduced to a juridical interpretation, and it is not the goal of Islam to regulate the family.

Secondly, it is dangerous. First because it is a movement that was born to delegitimise feminism. And because it gathers together a series of images about the feminine world in the Arab world. That is, in the case of the media, the images seek out the media, and the media seek out the images. Today there is a kind of general conspiracy that demands that the Arab woman be a veiled woman. But the veil is a symbol of oppression, however you look at it. I am not against the veil, I am against the discourse around the veil. Because a woman who wants to be oppressed has the right to be oppressed, I can’t oblige her to be free; but to elaborate a discourse of freedom around the veil is dangerous. (Gavroche, 2016)

This quote is loaded with debatable and controversial issues. Tamzali implicitly acknowledges that a major problem (and its probable cause) with feminism in Arab and Muslim majority countries is the gap between feminists such as herself and ‘those women who believed in God and the religion.’ At the same time, she points out—unintentionally perhaps—an important cause of this gap at the beginning of her talk: ‘Feminism doesn’t speak of morality. It speaks of freedom’. This may be exactly why most ‘believing’ women do not identify with feminism. The articulation that feminism and freedom must be opposite to spirituality or morality is a ‘shallow’ understanding of modernity that seeks ‘negative’ kind of freedom (Khuri, 1998, pg. xxii).

---

11 Tamzali avoids using labels such as ‘Muslim’, ‘Islamic’ or ‘Islamist’ women, as she is aware of their problematic nature. However, she points out an important distinction in Islam, again perhaps unintentionally, between a Muslim (submitter) and a Mu’min (believer), with the latter being a degree above the former as, while every believer is a Muslim, not every Muslim is a believer. This may be why the Islamic feminist Asma Barlas author of Believing Women in Islam: Unreading

12 According to Khuri (1998), negative freedom produces self-interested, materialistic individuals. This is far from authentic modernity whose ultimate aim is freeing the human being as a whole and where morality and spirituality are part of what being human means.
Moreover, she makes a contradictory statement regarding the role of Islamic feminism. She reduces Islamic feminism to the act of interpreting the Qur’an, which is indeed a central component in Islamic feminism. However, Islamic feminism consists of complex constructive processes of both theorisation and activism attempting to respond to issues related to diverse Muslim women’s lived experiences, whether they are religious, social, political, or economic, in a meaningful way that they do not find contradictory to their identity. Though Tamzali points out the importance of Islamic feminism and interpretation of the Qur’an as tools to communicate with the believing women in the 1970s who probably constituted a vast majority of the society, now, however, the same act of interpretation is dangerous to feminism because it ‘delegitimises’ it (Gavroche, 2016).

The above quote is also emblematic of two claims frequently repeated in the historiography of self-identified secular feminism in Algeria. The first is the idea that Algerian feminism has always been secular and has always held that only through secularism, seen as the gateway to democracy, women will gain their rights. Therefore, proposals for women’s rights within an Islamic framework are often rejected, denied, or presented as backward, and inextricably linked to violence and terrorism in secular feminist narratives. In general, I argue that there was a strong secular feminism in Algeria after independence (that may have been influenced by French feminism). Claiming that other feminist paths were not possible, secular feminists silenced or discriminated against ‘other’ articulations of feminism connected to religion. Lazreg (1994) critiques these newly formed women’s associations in the 1990s as being:

---

*Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (2002) preferred to be identified as a believing woman rather than an Islamic feminist.

‘The Bedouins say: ‘We believe’. Say: ‘You have not believed. However, say: 'We have become Muslims'. And faith has not yet entered your hearts. But, if you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not decrease anything in reward for your deeds...’ {Qur'an 49:14}
prisoners of their modernist discourse of rights. In a terrain where the notion of right gives way to the notion of faith, they feel disabled, and reveal their cultural weakness as well as the inadequacy of their strategy, based as it is primarily on wresting the protection of rights from the state. Indeed, the leadership of the women’s associations rejects the religious discourses without engaging its authors on their terrain. The ‘political mosque’ has eluded them, just as the secular political parties have given them only rhetorical support. [...] They cannot enter the political mosque to energize it with a feminist input because to a great measure they neglected to educate themselves in the language and history of Islam which have become the monopoly of the religious leaders. [...] feminists have reacted with awe and shock. Some have even felt that appeals to feminist associations in France and elsewhere might deliver them from an impending danger. But if there is danger it must be faced from within. A feminist fluent in the history of Islam and the *shariʿa* might provide a much-needed perspective in a debate that has remained exclusively male. (pg. 221)

Lazreg (1994) mentions the importance of realising these forms of expression and, moreover, women have to engage in religious knowledge, which could become the new power bases. Feminists’ feeling of being endangered since the 1980s, with the rise of political Islam, still prevails today (as Tamzali’s quote shows) with the rise of Islamic feminism.

The 1980s is considered by many critics as the real beginning of the Algerian feminist movements, although older movements began during the 1940s (Lazreg, 1994; Salhi, 2011). In October 1988, riots and demonstrations led to fundamental changes on the Algerian socio-political scene after the process of liberalisation put in place by the state (Tahi, 1992, as cited in Lloyd, 2005). On the political level, the multi-party system replaced the single-party system. This helped to create political parties and civil society associations. According to Amrane-Minne (1999), organisations created after the 1989 establishment of the multi-party system were of two kinds: religious (which represented the majority of organisations) and political. Women joined the politically-oriented ones because they felt that they gave them more freedom to express their views regarding women's rights heard. These were led by intellectuals or politicised women. They became well-known because they appeared in the media and utilised different means, including publications and demonstrations, to get their demands heard. It is not accurate, however, to consider the religious parties as apolitical in Algeria’s case. As Lazreg (1994) points out, the Islamic discourse—beyond stressing women's roles as mothers and wives—has an aim of ‘socializing them in the political culture of the future Islamic state’ (pg. 221).
All the political parties nominated female candidates in the May 1991 municipal elections, except the Islamist parties, FIS and Hamas, which had female members but not candidates. AmraneMinne (1999) points out that ‘it is in the small marginal parties of the extreme left that women are proportionally well-represented.’ As de la Perrie (1993, as cited in Lloyd 2005) argues, women’s associations, which were mainly located in larger towns in the north and centre of the country, focused on abolishing the family code. Other sources tell of different kinds of women’s organisations and their positions on the family code.

In fact, Bouatta (1997, p.g. 9-10) identifies four major tendencies of these viewpoints towards women’s issues after the end of the one rule party. She classified the affiliation of these associations women as: cultural, advancement of women (or democratic), socio-humanitarian and Islamist. However, she again zooms the comparison on what she classified as Islamist and democratic movements and see them as fundamentally opponents especially on the issue of the family code and CEDAW. She writes:

They refer to antagonistic visions of the world. The democratic associations derive their principles from human rights, in a universal conception of the human person. Their project of society is republication, democratic and modern. By contrast, the Islamist associations base themselves on religion and the specificities of the Muslim person. Their project of society is Islamic. (pg. 19)

Lloyd (2005), following Bouatta (1997), agrees that on the scarcely available material written on women’s affiliated with Islamists parties but they generally, as mentioned in a footnote, participate on proselytism and social welfare in the form of charities and supporting the poor. She also mentioned, that they are supportive of the family code because it represents the *sharī’a* law.

These generalisations do very little to further the focus and remit of feminist and practices related to religion. This footnote shows that conclusions are often reached, such as these regarding supporting the family code, without really analysing the women directly affected by them.
Bouatta’s (2007) study and Lloyd's footnote (2005), however, can serve as evidence for the existence of some form of feminist activism based on religion and attracting ‘women of all ages and from all social groups but it appears that the majority are students’( located at the time of the formation of the first women’s associations. Nevertheless, information on these associations is not presented in the media in the same way as other liberal reforms are, which is probably one of the reasons that it is difficult to identity an Islamic feminist by name in the Algerian context (like Fatima Mernissi\textsuperscript{13} in the Moroccan case, for example).

As the above quote indicates, however, we can get a sense of their presence, not only in the area of social work but also to get their voice heard on issues like the Family Code. The fact that the main narrative about women’s associations and their positions on the Family Code excludes this group and relegates information about them to a footnote is significant. It tells us about the marginalisation of this group of women by most dominant feminist narratives.

Lloyd (2005) asserts that the division among women’s organisations and individuals is along a continuum of women’s issues, but that the main division is the one between reform and the abolition of the Family Code. Many feminists are ‘beginning to wonder whether they have been trapped by the abolition versus amendment argument at the expense of broader women’s interests’ (Bouatta, 2007, as cited in Lloyd, 2005, pg. 76). The emphasis on this may seem redundant but a possible explanation could be the importance of frame of reference for women's rights which many consider as a starting point which needs to be agreed upon before they can move ahead.

Other feminists’ writings, like that of Cherifati-Merabtine (1994), portray the women’s movement since the 1980s as two dichotomous models. On one side, there are ‘the modernist women’, joined by the moudjahidate\textsuperscript{14} who support their endeavor. In the opposing camp are the

\textsuperscript{13} A number of critics (Zayzafoon, 2005; Ringrose, 2006; Cooke, 2003) have discussed Assia Djebar’s engagement with and production of Islamic feminism that attempted to reclaim Islam for women, namely in her novel \textit{Lion de Medine}.

\textsuperscript{14} It is an Arabic word meaning women fighters for a holy cause, defending one’s honour is considered also a type of \textit{Jihād}. It is written as such in some of the literature but I used the transliteration mujāhidāt throughout my research according to the IJMES transliteration syste
‘other women’, ‘those who reify the Islamic female ideal.’ The difference between the two is that ‘while women of the modernist trend and the moudjahidate distinguish themselves as gendered individuals who carry a clear, modern women’s projection of society, those of the Islamic persuasion aim, on the contrary, to diminish the visibility of women and select to merge into a projection of society based on Sharia’ (pg. 59).

This ‘modernist’ vision is connected to the national cause and the Algerian moudjahidate while the ‘other’ women, who are claimed to belong to the Islamist current, supposedly turn aside from this nationalist cause and look for other models like the Afghani moudjahidate. Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) lists the characteristics of ‘women favoured by the Islamist current’. It would have been more beneficial to tell the reader why the Islamist current was favoured by women, a large number of whom are university students, because, as she argues, they were behind the Islamists’ success in the municipal elections. If the Islamist current does, as is often argued, curtail women’s rights, why would they vote for it in large numbers? This is one point that needs further research, and which is often ignored in feminist historiography.

Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) concludes that the Islamic model is a refusal of ‘otherness’ in its national and universal dimensions (although she describes them elsewhere as ‘other’ women who belong to the Islamist current). On the other hand, we have the modernist thinkers who are able to integrate into universalism without losing their national identity. A number of problems arise from such essentialised representations of women in fixed categories that invariably lead to fixed results. Mahmood (2008) points out that the exclusionist and essentialist discourses are always connected and could be employed to legitimise political gains. She critiques, for example, the new imperialism’s utilisation of feminist discourse and highlights the problematic consequences of this line of thought:

A number of political pundits now suggest that perhaps the promotion of electoral democracy in the Middle East is not a good idea after all since it might bring Islamist political parties to power (as indeed was the case in the 2005 elections held in Palestine and
Apart from the fact that these commentators find Islamist ascendance to political power inimical to American strategic interests, the fate of women under Islamic regimes is often marshaled as the penultimate reason for thwarting Islamist success at the polls. Note here once again the neat equivalence drawn between Euro-American strategic interests and women’s well-being, between democracy (narrowly defined in electoral terms) and women’s status. (Mahmood, 2008, pg. 100).

This black and white presentation of women’s movements as either secular or Islamist seems too rigid to apply to reality. Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) herself later argues that the ‘modern’ women’s ‘reference to modernity is not set outside the parameters of Arabic Muslim civilisation’ and that the ‘other women’ are using notions of modernity such as ‘the right to education’ and ‘the right to work’ (pg. 59).

Though she previously claimed that the Islamists wish to limit women’s public presence, Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) confesses that women belonging to the Islamist current are asked to pursue all kinds of activities without losing their religiosity and are often encouraged to pursue their religious education alongside other forms of knowledge. It is ironic that these are not all considered to be means of empowerment and indeed agency in most feminist historiographical writings. The problem with ‘the certitude’ of liberalism for all the problems of Islam, as Mahmood (2008) puts it, is that it ignores ‘different ways of living religiously and politically’ in this world (pg. 106).

Some other feminist writings go as far as to reject the secular-Islamic dichotomy altogether and insist that women’s movements have always been and must be secular. They argue that all Algerian feminists have evolved into being secular. This claim denies other expressions of being feminist. Mihalache (2007) writes, ‘if before the beginning of the war Algerian women adhered to the vision of the new liberated nation based on the revival of Islamic traditions after the war ended, the same women transformed a more religious discourse into a secularised rhetoric based on universal values, such as equality, tolerance, and democracy’ (pg. 403). She goes on to discuss how Islam was gradually abandoned in feminist public discourse because, even if not an enemy, it is not an ally of women’s issues. Mihalache (2007) then mentions that 20 Ans Barakat (an organisation founded in 2003 by a coalition of Algerian feminists from Algeria and France) ‘has discard[ed]
completely the religious dimension and does not incorporate elements of Islamic feminism’ (pg. 406). Akila Ouared, one of the founders, said:

we will ignore the positions taken by the Islamist women who do not represent the Algerian women; we want to make aware the Algerian society of the injustice of the Code and I cannot imagine that even the most religious women would be against us … it is not admissible that justice denies the Algerian women as a full citizen in a country which calls itself democratic (cited in Mihalache 2007, pg. 406).

It is also ironic that the women in the 20 Ans Barakart insist on calling themselves mujāhidāt. This is contradictory, or at least selective, claiming that they are in any way linked to Islam. They claim to be defenders of the faith and the nation so as to legitimate their position.

The 1980s saw an increase in the popularity of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). As Moghadam (2003) states, ‘the fundamentalist agenda of the FIS was supported by a segment of the female population, and in April 1989 a demonstration of 100,000 women in favor of Islamism and sex-segregation shocked the anti-fundamentalist women’ (pg. 25). Again, there is a shortage of information about this demonstration. All that one knows about the purported 100,000-woman protest is that it was in support of Islamism. Conversely, the reaction of one woman and her opinion about why these women were protesting is given in detail: Khalida Messaoudi, was ‘shocked’ by this ‘fundamentalist uprising’, and left her feminist group, Egalité, because it ‘seemed to equivocate over the nature of the fundamentalist uprising’. She formed another organisation called L’Association pour le Triomphe des Droits des Femmes (Association for the Promotion of Women’s Rights).

Khalida Messaoudi is often presented as an authoritative voice in Algerian feminist literature. As Messaoudi says, feminists and democrats want the state to be based on rights rather than divine law (Messaoudi & Schemla, 1995). However, Messaoudi has been widely criticised for ‘her comments on Islamic topics […][which] demonstrate[s] her lack of Islamic knowledge’ which invoked criticism of religious circles and society. (de Abes, 2011, pg. 207). Mundy (2015) explains
that Messaoudi strongly opposed Islamists and seen them responsible for Algeria’s violence and the killing during the Black Decade (pg. 73)

Khalida Messaoudi was appointed as advisor to the president and later become part of the state system as Minister of Culture. It is no surprise that, as Moghadam (2003) says, comparing Iranian to Algerian feminism,

in contrast to Iran’s government, the Algerian government has recognised and rewarded feminists for their activism; In the summer of 2002, President Bouteflika appointed five women to cabinet positions—an unprecedented number in the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, an increasing number of courts are headed by women judges. (pg. 27)

A higher status is awarded to particular feminists speaking on behalf of every woman and they advocate particular ideas and rights as arising from secular spaces. Consequently, the views of certain women are deemed the more correct state of affairs, the more enlightened, the more natural, and the one that must be considered authentic. Other women’s views are deemed archaic and fundamentalist. The women who argue for these views are seen as misguided and they cannot speak for themselves. This contradicts the central claim of feminists advocating democracy.

A number of critics refer to the contested claims of clear boundaries of the secular and the religious, the submissive and the autonomous, and the political and the ethical within this kind of feminism. One of the leading critics in this field is Saba Mahmoud (2006) who critiques how feminism looks at difference in a way that wishes to erode or remodel it. She argues that

[t]his attitude toward difference not only seems to animate calls for Islamic reformation, but is also operative in contemporary strands of feminism, particularly in its certainty that women's sensibilities and attachments, those that seem so paradoxically inimical to what are taken to be women's own interests, must be refashioned for their own well-being. It is this arrogant certitude that I want to question. (pg. 108)

Moreover, Lloyd (2005) declares that a civil society that relies on liberal theories gives the state supreme power and ignores other structures of power based on religion, gender, or ideology.

---

15 Another narrative is provided to the enigma of the period by Nichole Ladewig (2014). He writes that, ‘citizens and international observers that the Algerian military has created elusive bands of soldiers that murder unveiled women in order to spur the Algerian citizens to reject the extremism of the fundamentalists, assuming that they are the culprits’ (pg. 254).

16 Winter (2001) argues in ‘Fundamentalist Misunderstandings: Issues in Feminist Approaches to Islamism’ that contrary to the general belief, Islamist women are educated and vocal.
Lazreg (1994) comments that liberal feminism, ‘whether practiced by American women, Middle Eastern women or Algerian male writers’ has its own contradictions: ‘the liberator discourse rests on the assumption of a fundamental inequality between women that can only be grasped in terms of a specialized language of ‘oppression’ (pg. 223). Instead of liberating women, this discourse has deepened women's isolation.

Telmcani (1992) notes that ‘the feminist groups have not succeeded in gaining active support from the democratic parties and groups and much less from secluded women’ (pg. 77). Telmcani argues this is because they have not represented alternatives that would address the problems affecting the overwhelming majority of Algerian women. On the other hand, whenever the Islamic associations led by El Irchad Wallslah (Orientation and Reform) and the D’awa Islamiah (Islamic Mission) called for protests, they attracted many thousands of women wearing the hidjab in the streets (pg. 77).

Again, the reader is not given an explanation as to why a large number of women were attracted to such calls.

Another explanation for the gap between the majority of women and secular feminists could be that, while secular feminists claim to adhere to global values and human rights agendas, many religious women may feel that secular feminists are more Eurocentric and contradictory. Kimble (2006), who studied the paradoxical French feminists’ attitudes in the metropole towards Algerian women’s issues in the interwar period (and which is still valuable to the analysis of Algerian feminism in general), says:

It is ironic that the leading women’s rights organizations endorsed the application of the Civil Code in Algeria while simultaneously advocating for its overhaul in France [...] Women’s confidence in the Civil Code as an ameliorating mechanism for Maghrébinas can arguably be seen as an expression of their republicanism. The belief that the proper application of republican principles of universal rights and French laws and institutions could perfect the human condition was also an expression of their commitment to the ‘civilizing mission’ of imperialism (pg. 116).

So, while French secular feminists thought of themselves as advocating universal values, they were in fact Eurocentric. French feminists at the time were intolerant of religious differences and advocated the eradication of the sharī‘a law before there could be any real progress in Algerian
women’s conditions (Kimble, 2006). It could be argued that Algerian secular feminism\textsuperscript{17} may have been affected by these early ideas espoused by French feminists.

To conclude, the dominant Algerian narratives and attitudes towards Islamic feminism can be summarised as being in three categories. The first group as exemplified by Tamzali (Gavroche, 2016) and Mihalache (2007) denies its existence. This denial does not reflect reality and turns a blind eye to other forms of feminist activism and theorisation. The second group acknowledges the existence of Islamic feminism but in hasty manner as in Bouatta (1997) and Lloyd’s footnote (2005). Information about Islamic feminism in this presentation is subject to generalisation and conclusions reached without really examining the women directly affected by them. It is an exclusionary discourse that warrants further analysis. The third group also acknowledges the existence of Islamic feminism but presents it in the secular-religious dichotomy, like Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) and Messaoudi and Schemla (1998). This reductionist presentation is marked more by stereotypes than knowledge. Recent scholarly research examining Islamic feminism in general since the 1970s and Islamist women in particular during past two decades has already started to emerge in other contexts like Egypt, Palestine, Morocco and Tunisia but not in Algeria. This has left a great gap in our understanding of women’s different experiences in Algeria.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: RELIGION, GENDER, AND POLITICS IN ALGERIA FROM COLONIALISM TO INDEPENDENCE**

France colonised Algeria for 132 years (Joffe 1993), the longest in French North Africa compared to Morocco and Tunisia. French colonial settlement fundamentally altered and reconstructed the country in ways that continue to have long lasting effects (Evans, 2013; Benrabah, 2013; Lazreg, 2014), as it continues to shape the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

\textsuperscript{17} In the past, Algerians were not granted equal citizenship under French colonialism until they gave up their right to be tried according to personnel law and courts based on Sharia and adhered to French courts (Behr, 1961). At present, France still discriminates against 4 million Algerian-French citizens who are treated as second class in many areas, like education, housing, employment and political representation. They are often looked at as the ‘enemy-within’ especially by rightwing politicians (Ramdani, *The Guardian*, 2012)
of Algerian society. The French colonialists changed Algeria’s demography by relocating entire tribes (Charrad, 2001; Joffee, 1993). They enforced new systems of language and education (Benrabah, 2013; Christelow, 2014; Laaredj-Campbell, 2015), personal laws (Weil & Porter, 2008; Sajed, 2013), agricultural practices (Elkins & Pedersen, 2012), gender roles (Knauss, 1987), and ethnic relations (Lorcin, 1995; Roberts, 2017). They reshaped the identities of Algerian people and landscape through changing their family names and the names of public spaces (Lazreg, 2014) and emphasising ethnic differences (Lorcin, 1995; Roberts, 2017). French colonial leaders even manipulated the meanings and practices of Islam, employing religion as a tool for the maintenance of their rule through the use of various, seemingly contradictory, tactics to dominate and marginalise Islamic teachings and culture (Laaredj-Campbell, 2015).

Through all of these impositions, the legacy of French colonialism is seen through the reverberation of its policies and ideology, partly evidenced in affective ways as Algerians describe feelings that they are still controlled by France and its supporters from within the nation (McDougall, 2017). The history of colonialism in Algeria has bearing on this study, given how French colonialism created axes of oppression that continue to shape Algerian society today. I do not wish to historicise colonialism in Algeria; rather, my aim is to highlight how it has constructed axes of oppression that continue to shape the country’s contemporary power relations. For Zuhur Wanisi, the evolution of the role and meaning of Islam in Algerian society would shape her life, writings, political ambitions and trajectory, accomplishments, and feminist agenda, through which she formed her own brand of Islamic feminism.

**Intersections and Axes of Power in Algerian History**

When considering the Algerian context, we must examine and take into account the many axes of power that intersect to shape and complicate the identities and personal experiences of the
Algerian people, the most important of which include religion, political affiliation, education, language, and ethnicity. The history of French colonialism, the political movements that emerged during and after the struggle for independence, the role of religion and rise of Islamism — none of these events can be isolated from the socioeconomic and political conditions of the historical moment in which they emerged.

Ethnicity and language also need to be accounted for in understanding contemporary Algerian society in all its complexity, both of which were embedded in the history of education, particularly during the colonial and revolutionary periods. As the free schools gained popularity and contributed to the rise of the independence movement, it was the explicit reference to ethnicity and language, along with religion, in the rhetoric of the free schools—‘Islam is our religion, Arabic our language, and Algeria our fatherland’—that caught the nation’s attention and stirred nationalist sentiment, as more and more Algerians joined the cause to reclaim an Algerian identity and way of life that was distinctive from France and its colonial powers. After independence, the project of establishing an Algerian ‘authenticity’ apart from French culture continued as President Boumédiène embarked on the process of Arabisation.

As in the colonial and revolutionary periods, language continues to intersect with, and to be influenced by, education and political affiliations (Benrabah, 2013). It is an ongoing debate in the Algerian educational system as to which languages should be included and taught, such as Tamazight (also known as Amazigh), an indigenous language spoken by Algeria’s Berber communities which include different groups such as Kabayle, Shawiya, Mozabites, and Tuareg (Castellino & Cavanaugh, 2013). Various dialects of Tamazight, or Berber, are spoken by close to 20 percent of the Algerian population (Berger, 2002), while three-quarters of Algerians speak Algerian Arabic ḏārja. Last December, Berber activists protested a parliamentary decision to reject an amendment to the 2018 budget legislation that would have formalised the teaching of the Tamazight language in local schools (Kestler-D'Amours, 2017). Berbers have fought for language rights for decades, achieving substantial gains over the years. While the 1963 constitution after
independence declared Arabic as the sole ‘national’ and ‘official’ language, it was amended in 2002 to include Tamazight as a second ‘national’ language, and again in 2016, naming Tamazight the state's second ‘official’ language’ (Kestler-D'Amours, 2017). While these changes have been welcomed by the Berber communities, the protesters have insisted that recognising Tamazight as an official language does not go far enough—for them, the government must make investments to include the language in state institutions, such as schools, for its official status to have real meaning and impact.

While the French language does not have official status in Algeria, it is widely used in various institutions, including the government, media, and education, and it continues to play the role of the country’s lingua franca. The persistence of French demonstrates one reason why language remains an important axis of power in Algeria, as French is still seen as more prestigious than Arabic and more media outlets are Francophone than Arabophone (Berger, 2002). It is widely understood that a writer who writes in French will be more likely to win international attention and acclaim, such as Assia Djebar, the well-known feminist novelist, playwright, and filmmaker, and Kateb Yassine, who wrote novels and plays in both French and Algerian Arabic dialect. Writers such as Djebar and Yassine became fluent in French because they attended French schools but struggled over the dilemma of using the colonial language in their works. This struggle reflects the ongoing challenges of decolonisation in a world that is increasingly globalised.

**Colonial Period (1830-1962)**

The French colonial powers used various, seemingly contradictory, tactics to dominate and marginalise Islamic teachings and culture (Entelis & Naylor, 1992; Alghailani, 2003; Laaredj-Campbell, 2015), employing Islam as a tool for the maintenance of its rule (Hardman, 2009). Thus, I argue that the French colonisers introduced the politicisation of Islam in Algeria, contrary to popular, even taken-for-granted, notions that such politicisation was initiated by Algerian Muslims themselves. French colonialists also exacerbated normative gender roles and,
much how they used Islam, they also used women and girls as a political tool, particularly through the education system (Laaredj-Campbell, 2015) and women’s emancipation (McMaster, 2012).

A colonial education. French colonial narratives promoted the mystification of Islam and the notion that its rituals and practitioners were ‘backwards’ (Hardman, 2009). Yet, as Wanisi recounts in her autobiography (2012), French soldiers would often raid schools in order to scrutinise their activities and curricula and ensure that nothing more than the memorisation of the Qur’an was being taught; Islamic teachings and Arab culture were forbidden (Laaredj-Campbell, 2016). For the French, allowing the teaching of the Qur’an upheld their image of being tolerant of religious difference; only allowing Qur’anic teachings and no other subjects kept its colonial subjects uneducated outside of Islam. As a result, many Algerian families boycotted the French schools as a form of colonial resistance (Laaredj-Campbell, 2016).

The French schools promoted the ‘Frenchness’ of the Algerian people, reinforcing gender roles as part of this project. Within the French schools, girls were taught to denounce their identities and heritage and praise the colonial rulers, as cited in Lazreg’s Torture and the Twilight of Empire (2008). She recounts a school play in which Algerian girls counted the blessings bestowed upon Algeria by France. Wanisi shared a similar account in her autobiography (2012), in which, for a school play, she was asked to play the role of Algerian girl whose manners were supposed to be ‘barbaric’; she refused despite her Algerian teacher’s insistence.

In her book, Changing Female Literacy Practices in Algeria (2016), Anne Laaredj-Campbell surveyed the history of girls’ education in Algeria during colonialism, concluding that the French curriculum was gender-biased, class-biased, biased against Islam, racist, and served to stoke ethnic divisions among indigenous Algerians. She reported that the French schools favored boys; it also changed the curriculum for girls, shifting away from teaching them to read and write to an exclusive focus on ‘home economics’ in which they were taught sewing and knitting. This curriculum allowed for the exploitation of the labour of school girls, whose finished works sold for French profit (Bennoune, 2002; Laaredj-Campbell, 2016).
A number of women who served as teachers during the colonial period reported experiencing ‘shock at discovering extreme poverty among the rural population and de facto racial segregation in classes’, stating that they learned about ‘the meaning of ‘apartheid’ through their years of teaching’ (Lazreg, 2008, pg. 164). They also ‘discovered that Algerian children were deliberately prevented from attending school’ (pg. 164). By 1957, three years into the Algerian revolution, the number of Algerian girls in grade school and high school had dropped dramatically to 116, 340 and 1, 558, respectively, out of a total population of 2,062,000 Algerian women and girls under the age of 20 (Laaredj-Campbell, 2016). These encounters with poverty and racism led some of these women to later join or support the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) during the revolution (Lazreg, 2008).

The ‘Free Schools’ and the rise of an Islamic Algerian nationalism.

In the history of Algeria, there is no such a thing as Islamic Algerian nationalism; it is only known as Algerian nationalism. What I am arguing here is that a distinctive faction of nationalism based on Arabic-Islamic Algerianness was formed. There is historical evidence that the French attempted to win favors of the Sufi leaders of the Zawāyā (lodges of Sufi followers supervised by marabouts) because they thought they would have more popular influence and would be easily manipulated (Christelow, 2014). After a number of revolts by Sufi leaders during the nineteenth century, they put the Sufi orders under study (Burke, 2014). The complicity with French colonialism among some of the leaders of the Zawāyā (Fage & Oliver, 1975) and lack of religious knowledge witnessed by the ‘ulamā’ (Muslim scholars trained in Islamic law), spurred the birth of the Islamic Reform movement in Algeria, led by Ibn Badis, who became an emblematic figure of the movement.

In 1931, Ibn Badis founded the Association of Algerian Muslim ‘Ulamā’ (Association des Oulémas Musulmans Algériens, AOMA; Jam‘iyyat al-‘Ulamā’), a national group of Islamic scholars who were determined to save Algerian culture from being usurped by the French colonial agenda. Concluding that the Zawāyā had become co-opted by the French, Ibn Badis saw the need to
open a new type of school in order to revive Islamic and Arabic culture in Algeria and founded what he called the ‘free schools’. Girls could attend these schools for free; boys could also attend but paid small fees (Alghailani, 2003). In the late 1930s, the first free school opened in Constantine, where both Ibn Badis and Wanisi were born and resided. Wanisi attended a free school—hers was the generation who were taught by Ibn Badis’s immediate students—and she later served in the free schools as a teacher.

The education at the free schools was distinctly nationalist. Ibn Badis saw the schools as a way to revive and construct an authentic Algerian identity, distinctive from the French, based on three elements—Islam, Arabic, and homeland—as exemplified by the school motto: ‘Islam is our religion, Arabic our language, and Algeria our fatherland’ (Laaredj-Campbell, 2016). Ibn Badis and other members of the AOMA saw Islam as a unifying force for Algerians, a way to overcome tribal differences and differences among the different madhāhib, the glue that could hold this diverse society together. As Vince (2015) argues, people including her interviewee Fadela M’Rabet believed in:

the power of Islam—in this context, in the 1960s —to provide a meaningful framework to express nationalist aspirations. The ‘Arabo-Islamic collective identity’ was not just a romantic trope produced, and confined to, a conservative elite of religious scholars, it could also resonate with French-educated, Marxist, secular feminists such as Fadela M’Rabet, as it could with Algerians of European origin’ (pg. 156-157).

However, there were limits to how much the free schools could unite Algerians; certain groups within Algeria’s diverse society might have felt alienated by the free schools; namely, Berbers, Jews, and others who did not practice Islam nor speak Arabic (Benrabah, 2013).

The free schools were groundbreaking, defined by their distinctive pedagogy and curriculum and extracurricular activities (Vince, 2015; Laaredj-Campbell, 2016). By enabling girls to attend without paying fees, the free schools promoted educational equality between boys and girls. The curriculum included subjects absent in the Zawāyā and the French schools, such as cultural heritage and the current sociopolitical situation of Algerians. Teachers taught their students songs about Algeria, Islam, Muslim identity, and Arab culture (Wanisi, 2012). And while Ibn Badis was part of
the Maliki madhhab or school, he insisted that the free school students, especially those who specialized in the judiciary and fatwa, should study all Islamic doctrines in order to examine issues with a broad Islamic, rather than narrow differences among madhāhib, perspective (Wanisi, 2015). He encouraged his students to become critical and independent thinkers in order to develop what he called a ‘true knowledge’ (Wanisi, 2015). The free schools were immediately popular among Algerians, who were enthusiastic about the opportunity to receive the type of education they desired for themselves and their children (LaaredjCampbell, 2016). They soon spread throughout the country, with supporters offering to donate funds, land, and even their labour to help build the schools and teach in them (Laaredj-Campbell, 2016).

**Revolutionary Period (1954-1962)**

The impact of the free schools went well beyond their students. The motto, ‘Islam is our religion, Arabic our language, and Algeria our fatherland’, would be adopted as the centrepiece of the nationalist ideology, becoming the banner of the revolution (Laaredj-Campbell, 2016; Shillington, 2013), which erupted in 1954 when the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) launched armed revolts throughout the country, calling for a sovereign Algerian state. After seven years of brutal war with the French, the revolutionaries achieved independence for Algeria. During the revolution, Islam helped to carve out an Algerian nationalist identity that was distinctive from the French (Vince, 2015). The resistance movement also incorporated Islamic terminology as the War of Liberation became referred to as jihād, its martyrs shuhadāʾ, and its freedom fighters mujāhidīn and mujāhidāt (Seferdjeli, 2012). Yet, despite its religious overtones, the nationalist framework constructed by the revolutionaries was broad enough for non-Muslims to join the revolution, including the French and Europeans in general, based on nationalist ideas.

The revolution created new opportunities for women and thus new expectations for gender roles. Women FLN activists who ‘left their homes and families to join the FLN armed guerrilla bands, the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN)’ were referred to as the mujahidate (mujāhidāt)—women freedom fighters (Seferdjeli, 2012, pg. 239). As Cooke (2002) explained, ‘[t]he appeal to
women’s participation was secular but also specifically Islamic. The *soeurs mujahidate* were expected to fight for the liberation of the country and they entered theretofore forbidden spaces, mingling with men’ (pg. 231). The mujāhidāt participated in the revolution in large numbers, serving various roles. Some were armed resisters (Vince, 2009) while others provided logistical support such as cooking, washing clothes, nursing the wounded, and providing shelter for soldiers and their weapons (Bouatta, 1994; Seferdjeli, 2012). They also carried weapons, letters, food, and clothes for the soldiers (Bouatta, 1994). As Bouatta detailed in her essay, ‘Feminine Militancy: *Moudjahidate* During and After the Algerian War’ (1994):

Women were involved in the war in a variety of ways. They went into the maquis as nurses or as fighters: they were moudjahidates. The fidaïyates, those who planted bombs stayed in the city; others, and sometimes the same ones, carried the messages, the money, and weapons. The ‘Battle of Algiers’ could not have taken place without these women. However, the majority of women took part in the war more discreetly. These anonymous women provided the supply and logistic corps of the war; they provided the medical care, did the cooking, and hid the passing moudjahidines. It was these women who were harassed by the French soldiers because their sons or husbands had gone to the war. They also had to put on the ‘apron’ and integrate the ‘Fatma’ group because the men were absent and they had to meet the needs of their families. It was these women, too, who searched for missing persons or for prisoners, wandering from camp to camp, from prison to prison, and always on the lookout for any information that might help them with their search…It was the women who, in defiance of the French army, took to the streets on 11 December 1961 to repudiate colonial propaganda claiming that the war concerned only a minority of Algerians. Their action demonstrates the attachment of the Algerians to the [FLN] and to independence. This massive emergence of women on to the public scene impressed international opinion. (pg. 19)

Through their participation in the war of liberation, women were seen as gaining their independence, as illustrated in Ibn Bella’s speech after the war ended. By and large, the mujāhidāt were respected among the Algerian people and in official discourse. However, there remains debate surrounding the place of women in Algerian society after independence, with some Western feminists bemoaning the idea that many women returned to the kitchen.

France’s gendered antisubversive war strategies. During the revolutionary period, the French colonial powers used a variety of ‘antisubversive war’ strategies to maintain their grip on the country. As before the war began, such strategies included those that targeted women and girls (Lazreg, 2008; Perego, 2015; Seferdjeli, 2004, 2005). As Lazreg (2008) argues, the French army’s
use of women and girls as ‘antisubversive allies’ was ‘dual and internally contradictory’, using both ‘military feminism’ and ‘terror tactics’ (pg. 146). Similarly, Seferdjeli (2004) analysed ‘the different measures the French authorities took to ‘encourage’ Muslim women's emancipation during the Algerian war’ (pg. 19). As Perego (2015) explained, the elaborate emancipatory campaign to ‘liberate’ Algerian Muslim women was motivated by the desire to uphold the myth that Algerian Muslim gender relations in the territory were ‘backwards’ and only they could rectify this shortcoming in Algerian society. They consequently embarked upon the emancipation campaign mainly in pursuit of convincing outsiders of France’s purported ability and duty to make Algeria ‘modern’. (pg. 349)

As part of its ‘military feminism’ or ‘emancipation’ strategy, oppressive attempts of unveiling were theatrically carried out by the French through unveiling ceremonies (Lazreg, 2008; Perego, 2015; Seferdjeli, 2005). This ritual of unveiling of women took place ‘on official podiums as part of the theatre of cultural liberation’ (Humphrey, 2009, pg. 215). As Lazreg explained, unveiling women was part of a French military campaign aimed at breaking down the ‘homogeneity’ of Algerians despite their social and ethnic differences, which it attributed to Islam…It was assumed that shedding the veil would pry women away from family and community; a new ‘solidarity’…would subsequently be built for them within colonial society in accordance with the antisubversive principle of restructuring the population after destructuring it. (pg. 149)

Yet, as Lazreg noted, these public unveilings revealed a ‘cultural illiteracy’ among the French strategists, who singled out the veil for its ‘symbolic significance’, seeing it ‘as a gesture that dissolved local culture and ushered in an all-French French Algeria’ even as veiling was not practiced widely among rural women nor, increasingly, among young women in the lycées [secondary schools] (pg. 151). Ultimately, the campaign, which was directed at the FLN, backfired (Lazreg, 2008; Seferdjeli, 2004). As Lazreg explained, Algerian women and men ‘saw the fetishization of the veil as one more act of colonial evasion of the fundamental problem posed by colonial rule: domination’ (pg. 151).

France’s unveiling campaign was also carried out by a corps of women—teams of French and
Algerian women doctors and social workers which formed the *Equipes Médico-Sociales Itinérantes* (Mobile Socio-Medical Teams), or EMSI (Lazreg, 2008; Seferdjeli, 2005). While the women who formed it were mostly civilians, the corps was military in nature, and they were ‘subjected to military rules of conduct and received detailed instructions on how to discharge their functions from the military sectors or quarters in which they served’ (Lazreg, 2008, pg. 147). Known specifically as *Adjointes Sociales Sanitaires Rurales Auxiliaries* (Auxiliary Rural Social and Health Workers), or ASSRA, the corps offered free medical care; yet the mission of the corps was not sociomedical assistance per se. Rather, such assistance was used as a medium ‘for the EMSI to collect information on their subjects, identify potential allies, disseminate government directives, and sell colonial ideology through a critique of the role of women in native society’ (pg. 147). The French army took this strategic interest in women upon concluding that the FLN was having a positive impact on the Algerian family, especially in matters of marriage, and was thus changing gender relations in the right direction for women, but not with France as a sponsor… Faced with the prospect of a ‘possible renaissance’ of the Algerian population, the army found it necessary to revise the colonial stereotypical conception of women’s roles in the family for tactical reasons. At the same time, it upheld the view that the Algerian family needed changing to approximate an idealized French family…The point was to ‘expand’ women’s influence from the family to the larger society, but in accordance with ‘pacification’ objectives. (pg. 146)

The ASSRA held ‘meetings’ with women in villages and towns, offering lessons on topics ‘such as hygiene, child rearing, and housekeeping…as entry points for propagandist discussions of key political issues focused on the military conception of the war’ (Lazreg, 2008, pg. 148). To make them more effective, the lessons often included references to local proverbs and the Qur’an. And the ASSRA were ‘given step-by-step instructions on how to make women remove their veils. Fighting veils was on a par with getting rid of “flies,” “ticks,” and “lice”’ (pg. 148).

While, as part of its antisubversive war strategy, the French army used the EMSI and ASSRA to target Algerian women with the aim of ‘changing their lifestyles as proof of their commitment to continued colonial rule’, it also subjected women to various forms of violence (Lazreg, 2008, pg. 146). Many Algerian women were raped, tortured, imprisoned, and killed by
French soldiers. Like Lazreg, Perego (2015) highlighted the hypocrisies embedded in the French army’s treatment of women, stating that ‘French soldiers and military leaders, including individuals directly implicated in the “emancipation” campaign, were actually confining, abusing, and torturing Muslim women rather than freeing them’ (pg. 349). As Lazreg (2008) explained, in Algeria, rape ‘was happening in the context of France’s claim to modernise Algerian society…It is precisely the violation of Algerian’s social organisation that the army sought to achieve above and beyond providing for the sexual gratification of the troops’ (pg. 156). Rape of women in the villages by French soldiers was so widespread it became banal, with men from the FLN tacitly accepting the rape of their wives and daughters by acting as if it had not occurred when they knew it had. Lazreg surmised that ‘where rape is routinized, and men are powerless, pretending that it does not occur is a coping mechanism’ (pg. 158).

Post-Independence Period (1962-present)

Islam as state religion and source of national identity for a free Algeria. After independence, their role in spurring the nationalist movement notwithstanding, the AOMA and ‘ulama’ became marginalised and coopted by institutionalising Islam as numerous factions and political parties sought to seize power and the opportunity to run Algeria as a free nation (Bonora-Waisman, 2003). The FLN, successfully transitioning from a liberation movement into socialist political party, emerged victorious, as one of its leaders, Ahmed Ben Bella, served as Algeria's first president, taking office in 1963. The FLN would control the political sphere for decades to come, being the sole legal and ruling party in Algeria until other parties were legalized in 1989, establishing a multiparty system for the first time.

Islam would continue to play an important role in Algerian politics in the postcolonial period. The religion became cemented as the basis for nationalist identity and the new constitution proclaimed Islam as the religion of the Algerian state, a view also adopted by the Maliki madhab of jurisprudence. The newly independent state also embarked on a process of Arabisation in an
attempt to realize an Algerian authenticity that was distinctive from the French, a project in which Wanisi was an instrumental player (Wanisi, 2012). During its reign, the FLN attempted to control the religious sphere.

After a coup d’état led by Colonel Houari Boumédiène ousted Ben Bella in 1965, Boumédiène dissolved the National Assembly, suspended the 1963 Constitution, and gave the state full control over major Islamic activities such as the ‘Annual Seminars for the propagation of Islamic Thought’ during the 1970s (McDougall, 2017). These conferences or seminars represented the FLN’s attempt to create a space for sharing religious information and discussions. Muslims from around the world gathered, particularly from North Africa and the Middle East, to exchange ideas. Women, who were allowed to participate, and female students attended in substantial numbers, including Wanisi and Zainab Al-Ghazali (Wanisi, 2012; Saddiq 2008).

In 1970, the Algerian state unveiled an Islamic campaign led by Mouloud Gasim, the Minister of Religious Affairs and Education, which condemned ‘moral decadence’, Westernisation, and French practices in Algeria (McDougall 2017). In 1971, the state supervised the publication of a new magazine called Asala (‘authenticity’), which reflected this campaign and officially expressed the state’s view on religious issues.

During this period, a plethora of debates emerged in the public sphere over how Islam should be practiced, including the fiercely contested issues of polygamy and the family law, of which Wanisi was a part, as she discusses in her autobiography (2012). Women who participated in the revolution—the mujāhidāt—and a number of feminists publicly denounced the family law project for its discrimination against women (Salhi, 2010). Debates around the family law continued throughout the 1970s, with the mujāhidāt and other women playing a prominent role in opposing its ratification. When the mujāhidāt participated in the family code protests alongside other feminists under the banner ‘Hassiba Ben Bouali: If you could see our Algeria today’—referencing the woman freedom fighter who was killed by French forces during the 1957 Battle of Algiers and regarded as a nationalist hero—the government was unable to discredit or otherwise repress their march. This
march is often described as the moment when the mujāhidāt stepped out and broke their silence (Slyomovics, 2016). However, those who were against gender equity conclude simply that these mujāhidāt are ‘supernatural’ and their position in society cannot be repeated by other women, as their legitimation stems from their defense of the nation, the land, and their struggle for a free Algeria, a duty that has always been the exclusive domain of men. And their contribution to the country could not be denied, as some might, as their participation in the revolution was documented on film, in oral narratives, and in letters given to them by the FLN after the war. Women from the younger generations have attempted to hold onto this history as long as possible by seeing themselves as the granddaughters of Hassiba Ben Bouali and Djamila Bouhired, also revered as a nationalist hero. Wanisi (2012) herself was a mujāhidā, serving as a revolutionary political author. She was keen on proving it in her autobiography by providing a letter and photos which documented her participation alongside the likes of Hassiba Ben Bouali and Djamila Bouhired.

**The Islamic ‘Awakening’ and the Rise of Islamism**

The Islamic ‘awakening’, or revival (ṣāḥwa), that emerged globally in the 1970s also manifested in Algeria in particular ways, building momentum throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Zebiri, 1993). While all political parties remained banned until 1989, various Islamic groups and associations formed as part of the awakening, with three prominent centres of the Islamist movement in Algeria: the Muslim Brotherhood in Algiers, under the leadership of Mahfoudh Nahnah; the University Mosque, following Malik Bennabi; and the AOMA.

Bennabi, a philosopher and writer, was known for his efforts to create a space to discuss Islam in a more universal and modern way, interrogating the relationship between Islam and modernity (Naylor, 2006). In 1982, members of the AOMA\(^\text{18}\) gathered, including prominent ʿulamā’

---

\(^{18}\) The organisation under the same name AOMA established in 1931 ceased to exist officially in 1954 when its members joined the war of independence. Some argue that all organisation were made to stop its activities under the principle of unity of state and party after independence. After 1989 with the right to establish civil and political organisation was granted, it was revived by its old members and followers. So it could be thought of as extension of Ibn Badis’s AOMA established in 1931.
such as Abbassi Madani, Abulatif Sultani, and Ahmed Sahnoun (Willis, 1999). Together, they formed a *bayān* (a *communiqué* / list of recommendations) consisting of 14 recommendations for the government, including the application of Islamic Law (*sharīʿa*) and the Islamic economic model, bans on the judicial appointments of women and co-mixing of men and women in institutions, and to beware of religion’s enemies in state institutions.

The late 1980s saw dramatic changes in Algerian politics, culminating in a new constitution in 1989 that allowed for multi-party democracy. The Islamist movement continued to gain strength (Willis, 1999). Social unrest began to spread as a response to government reform measures, with people angry over unemployment, homelessness, and other forms of social inequality, along with perceptions of government corruption (Evans & Phillips, 2007). The unrest led to a series of strikes and walkouts by students and workers in Algiers in October 1988 which escalated into riots (King, 2009). The government’s violent response to the rioting during what was later referred to as ‘Black October’ spurred even more outrage, with Islamists taking control of certain areas. Out of this turmoil, a constitutional referendum emerged, declaring, among other measures, the legalization of multiple political parties in Algeria, ending the one-party rule by the FLN and opening up new spaces for political participation and freedom of expression.

In response to the new laws, numerous political parties sprung up, along with the *Rābitāt al-Daʿwa* (League of the Islamic Call), ‘the first body that sought to bring all of the various Islamist groups and leaders together under one, albeit loose, institutional framework’ (Willis, 1999, pg. 115). Established under the leadership of Ahmed Sahnoun, the organisation aimed to ‘work for the defense and propagation of Islamic values’ and to unify the ranks of the Islamist movement which ‘had become dangerously divided’ during Black October (Willis, 1999, pg. 115). As it was essentially an apolitical organisation, some of its members concluded that ‘a separate, specifically

The ‘ulamāʾ’ mentioned above diversified into other movements later. For example, Abulatif Sultani formed the Muslim Brotherhood party in Algeria, and Abbassi Madani formed his own Islamist movement the FIS.
political, Islamist party needed to be formed to take best advantage of the rapidly expanding political landscape’ (Willis, 1999, pg. 116).

Soon after, the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS) was born, founded by Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, who served as president and deputy, respectively. Belhadj, a charismatic preacher and teacher, played an important role during the October crisis and had attracted a large following, especially among marginalised and poor urban youth (Willis, 1999). The announcement of the FIS was received with skepticism and doubt by senior members of the *Rabita*, wary of the explicitly political agenda of the FIS. Yet, such doubts did not stop the official launch of the party on February 18, 1989. While some of the *Rābitāt’s* leaders refused to join, the party ‘attracted a wide array of senior Islamist clerics and figures’ (Willis, 1999, pg. 117).

Capitalizing on the widespread discontent that led to the October crisis, with youth angry over their dismal economic situation, the failure of socialism, and the agricultural revolution, the FIS projected itself as the leader of this new revolution (Evans & Phillips, 2007). It redirected the youth in service of its ideology, leading to its rapid ascent to power (Boubekeur, 2007; McDougall, 2017). Its popularity spread particularly fast among university students. The FIS promised to establish an Islamic system based on justice, better living standards, freedom of expression, fighting corruption, and addressing the social ills that had accumulated in the postcolonial period (Goytisolo & Bush, 2000). Such rhetoric earned the trust and devotion of the disaffected masses, who had become embittered towards the FLN and who saw in FIS the strongest and the most vocal opposition, offering the best hope to confront corruption. In short order, the FIS became enormously popular.

The FIS was not only influential politically but also culturally. During the period that the visibility and popularity of the FIS increased, so too did veiling among women and mosque attendance; the number of mosques and preachers soared to record numbers (Goytisolo & Bush, 2000). It became normalized for Algerian children to be more religious than their parents, the former often teaching the latter the ‘true religion’. Furthermore, the party engaged in social welfare
campaigns, such as providing relief and assistance for victims of the 1989 Chenoua earthquake (Hroub, 2010). With an epicentre just west of Algiers on the northern coast and a magnitude of 6.0, the earthquake killed at least 30 people, injured more than 230, and left 15,000 displaced (United States Geological Survey, 2017). The social welfare assistance that the FIS offered to earthquake victims and others was instrumental in the spread of its ideology (Hroub, 2010).

The State Challenge to Islamism and Plunge into Civil War: The Black Decade

In December 1991, in Algeria’s first multi-party national parliamentary elections, the FIS stunned the country’s leaders with its resounding victory in the first round, winning absolute majorities in 188 of 430 electoral districts, compared to the FLN’s 15 seats (Zebiri, 1993). Some attribute the decisive victory of the FIS in the 1991 parliamentary elections to women voters. It was the proxy vote; the FIS used the voices of their women (Salhi, 2010). Others claim that the FIS manipulated the youth and poor people, capitalizing on and channeling their anger into support for the party (Hroub, 2010). Such discourses echo those that presume that women with religious convictions are oppressed and have no agency of their own; these discourses also collapse women, youth, and the poor into one category of easily misled and exploited people.

Fearing a takeover, the government responded to the election results by cracking down on the FIS: President Bedjedid dissolved the Parliament, declared the elections void, and detained Madani. Those decisions had devastating political consequences, leading Bedjedid and many other members of government to resign, including Wanisi, who was by that time a member of Parliament. Calls by the FIS, FLN, and others to reinstate the electoral process led to widespread protests, including a boycott and other acts of civil disobedience on June 1, 1991, organised by the FIS, which led to the detention of more of its leaders. The turmoil escalated into the outbreak of violent demonstrations in numerous cities in 1992, to which the government responded by declaring a one-year state of emergency and banning the FIS (Esposito, 1999).

In declaring a state of emergency, the government was able to arrest huge numbers of activists and FIS-supporters—as many as 20,000 Algerians, most belonging to the FIS, were
arrested and placed in jails in the desert (Esposito, 1999). Some activists responded to the mass arrests by declaring *jihād* against the military and forming various armed groups, including the Islamic Armed Movement (MIA), mostly based in the mountains; the primarily urban-based Armed Islamic Group (GIA); and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), ushering in the Algerian Civil War. Called the ‘Black Decade’, the war lasted until 2002 and resulted in the deaths of as many as 200,000 Algerians and millions of dollars of damage to the country’s infrastructure and economy (Evans & Phillips, 2007). During the one-year emergency in 1992, FIS was outlawed along with many other organisations who were accused of affinity with it. Under Article 3, parties cannot exploit any of the national identity components—Islam, Arabism, or Amazighity—for their propaganda nor in their names or programs (Smmakia, 1997).

In addition to the huge number of civilian deaths and toll on the economy, the Black Decade and the periods preceding it led to great suffering among women. Some were attacked for not wearing the *hijāb*. Women also were severely affected by the civil war, some through the deaths of family members and friends and others as victims of rape. When Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected president in 1999, he promised to address problems faced by women.

**Algeria Today: New Roles for Religion and Women in Politics**

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US, Algeria became centre stage in US President Bush’s ‘War on Terror’ given the government’s experience with fighting terrorism. Islam and terrorism were associated in the media. Part of the rhetoric used to justify the war against al-Qa’ida was that Muslim women needed to be protected and saved from the terrorist group (AbuLughod, 2013; Esposito, 1999). Yet, after the US invasion of Afghanistan, the rhetoric shifted, framing Muslim women and men as threats.

In Algeria today, people continue to create new political parties, conscious to avoid the
inclusion of the term ‘Islamic’ or any language alluding to religion, given the ban on religious political parties. Such is the case of Naima Salhi, considered to be the first woman to have established her own political party in a Muslim majority country, the *Parti de l’équité et de la proclamation* (Party of Equity and Proclamation, PEP). As the president of PEP, she is a controversial figure who broke the stereotype of a woman activist, given her practice of veiling, her political positions which have put her at odds with the Algerian state and president, and her opposition to and boycott of past elections. A vocal figure, she has an extensive media presence on various platforms, where she engages in hotly contested debates, particularly regarding women and youth issues. Some consider her an Islamic feminist in the sense that, as she expressed herself in an interview (2015): ‘I defend women’s rights from within Islamic law which gives her all the freedom…as you can see I am one of the people who adopt Islamic law and I lead men. If I did not find this [permissible] in *sharīʿa*, I would not do it’ (my translation from Arabic).

**ZUHUR WANISI AS AN ISLAMIC FEMINIST: A CASE STUDY**

Using a case study approach, my methodology entails a textual analysis of the writings of Zuhur Wanisi, an Algerian Muslim woman writer, drawing on her 2012 autobiography *‘Abra Az-Zuhūr wa Al-A’shwāk: masār ‘imrāʾa* (Through Flowers and Thorns, a woman’s journey) as my primary source. I focus on the intersections of religion, gender, politics, and culture in three different periods that Wanisi witnessed: colonial, revolutionary, and post-independence.

In my search for Algerian feminist narratives whose frame of reference is Islam, Wanisi was certainly not the only example who I could classify as an Algerian Islamic feminist. I have chosen Wanisi as a case study not because she was the first woman to tread in spaces which were considered exclusively men’s, such as her ministerial work or serving in the Algerian parliament, nor because of her participation in the revolution, but because she represented different views than what would normally be classified as ‘radically feminist’. She is not a vocal figure in Algerian

---

19 One has to mention Louisa Hanoun head of the Labour party. She is the first Arab woman to have run for presidential elections.
feminist historiography but a prolific writer and a problematic one at that. Wanisi has only recently been given recognition as a writer—she is prolific, writing in a variety of genres including novels, short stories, opinion pieces, drama, as well as biographical and autobiographical narratives—though she is typically framed as a literary or political rather than feminist figure.

I also chose Wanisi for her educational background, having been part of the first generation of girls to attend the ‘free schools’ founded by Ibn Badis in the late 1930s, which promoted a distinctively Islamic and Algerian nationalism and are credited with spurring the nationalist movement which led to the Algerian revolution and eventual independence from France. Throughout her life, Wanisi held onto the ideology of the free schools and believed in its authenticity, reflecting Ibn Badis’ thought and agenda for a reformed Islam. Her writings carry the seeds of this early schooling and ideology that promote an Algerian Islamic identity.

Regarding the textual analysis, I concentrate primarily on Wanisi’s autobiography, in part because it is her most recent publication and because the autobiographical form allows her to reflect back on the diverse experiences and roles she played in her life and the events that she witnessed and participated in. Yet, I am not treating her text as an historical narrative nor do I read it from an exclusively gendered perspective; rather, I analyze how it was also shaped by her class status, ethnicity, education, and politics from within the context of the autobiographical genre. Overall, my intention is to find a feminist voice that is somehow different from other, more vocal Algerian feminists of the time—how she claimed feminist demands should be articulated, which could be perceived as a form of Islamic feminism in Algeria. It is not that her demands necessarily contradict other feminists’ demands; on the contrary, she would agree with most. I propose that the real difference between her feminism and that of other, more visible Algerian feminists who were her contemporaries is the frame of reference from which she discussed and practiced it, which, I will argue, is distinctly Islamic.

While I draw primarily upon her autobiography, I also draw on other source material including her other written works as well as the numerous interviews she has given, some of which
are found on YouTube while others in online newspapers. I use these sources to trace her participation in the long history of family law discussions in Algeria in the various roles she held, from literary writer and political figure, to first woman minister and member of parliament in the Algerian government, to editor of the first women’s magazine in Algeria and among the first women to establish the UNFA women’s organisation, in order to build the case that she practiced a distinctive form of Algerian Islamic feminism.

**Zuhur Wanisi’s Life and Writings: A Biographical Overview**

Zuhur Wanisi was born in Constantine, Algeria, in December 1936, where she lived until adulthood. Her life was marked by public service. Instead of being confined to a life of domesticity, she was offered opportunities to work in the public sphere as a teacher, writer, and government official, serving as both the first woman minister and first member of parliament in the Algerian government after independence.

After being educated in one of the first free schools in Constantine, Wanisi became a teacher in the free school at the age of 17. As she recounted in an interview, the schools had very little funding to keep them operational and depended heavily on the support from the neighborhoods in which they were located. She herself did not receive her first salary as a teacher for one-and-a-half years and even then, it was only 30 dinars, equivalent to the price of three loaves of bread today (Wanisi, 2004).

When the Algerian Revolution began in 1954, she joined the revolution while still working as a teacher. She served as a liaison officer between two ALN cells situated in the mountains, handdelivering communications written in Arabic between them. Additionally, she and other teachers delivered weapons and other necessary supplies to the ALN rebels. Wanisi also served as a political author during the revolution, inspired to write about the national liberation movement and related social issues. Her writing during this period was considered groundbreaking and in
recognition of it, she received the Medal of Resistance and the Medal of Appreciation in Media and
Culture.

She was first offered a membership in the FLN Foundation Council before she even
completed university (Wanisi, 2012, pg. 208). Such an offer was perhaps indicative of the times,
shortly after independence, when the government scrambled to find talented people to serve and
help build the young Algeria, especially as 800,000 Frenchmen and women departed the country
who constituted ‘nine-tenths of the country’s administrative and technical personnel’ (Humbaraci,
1966, pg. 4-5). Wanisi turned the position down so she could continue her studies and be more
prepared to serve her society as she believed education was Algeria’s new postcolonial revolution.
She graduated from the University of Algiers with BA in Literature, Humanities, and Philosophy
and also studied sociology. She continued to study sociology at the graduate level. Later, she was
elected by the FLN to the first elected popular national assembly in 1977.

After Boumédiène took over the presidency in 1965, he started Arabisation in part through
establishing an Arabic press. Wanisi became involved in building up Arabic-language journalism
and founded the literary magazine The Algerian Woman; as editor-in-chief, she was the first woman
to lead and run a women's magazine in Algeria, and she served in this capacity for 12 years. She
also contributed to the establishment of several journalistic institutions and associations and was at
the forefront of the Algerian Women's Union, the Federation of Algerian Journalists, and the
Writers' Union. Throughout her career, Wanisi worked toward the Arabisation of the Algerian
media.

Her trailblazing continued as she became the first Algerian woman to write fiction in Arabic
with the release of her first novel in 1967, *Al-Rasīf al-nā’īm (The Sleeping Sidewalk).* Her second
novel, *Yawmiyyāt Mudarrisah Ḥurra (From the Diary of a Free Female Teacher)*, published in
1978, draws heavily on her own experiences with the free school, first as a student and later as
teacher during the revolution. She published several works during the 1990s, including the novel
*Lunja and the Ghoul* (1994), and two collections of short stories, *ʿAjāʾīz al-Qamar (The Lunar Old*
Women) (1996) and Rosicada (1999), and a play, Duʿāʾ al-Ḥamām (Pigeons’ Prayers) (2005). She wrote exclusively in Arabic, reflecting her lifelong commitment to the Arabisation of Algeria. Her written works have received recognition and acclaim throughout the Arab world and beyond.

She would eventually join the government, serving as the Minister of Social Affairs in the government in 1982, the Minister for Social Protection in 1984, and Head of the Department of Education in 1986. In 1997, she became the first woman member of the Algerian Parliament. Before this, she was elected as a member of the National Peoples Council from 1977 to 1982.

After she retired at age 60, she began working on her autobiography—a project that would take her 10 years to complete—arranging what she could document about her long career in various roles, from teacher and revolutionary to activist in civil society to her service in the Algerian government. Yet her autobiography is more than a recounting of events, places, and people she knew during the various stages of her life. As her husband described in his introduction to the autobiography, witnessing this period of writing, ‘she was like a juggler, walking on a tightrope, trying to retain her balance, so she does not sway from one side to the other, otherwise she might fall, with others watching her’ (Wanisi, 2012, pg. 12)

Because of her long career in public service and the many public roles she has held, her autobiography is, in many ways, distinctive from what typifies the women’s autobiographical tradition. As Jelinek (1980) described, women’s autobiographies tend to emphasise personal and domestic details and connections to other people (pg. 10, cited in Smith & Watson, 1998, pg. 8). Wanisi writes extensively about her professional life and the successes she had in her various public roles, a feature that is seen as exemplary of men’s autobiographies in both the Arab world (Anishchenkova, 2014) and in the West (Jelinek, 1980; Smith & Watson, 1998). Yet, Wanisi also departs from the style common to men’s autobiographies in important ways: While she highlights her achievements, her aim is not necessarily to historicise or aggrandise them, as she emphasised throughout the book. Rather, she attempts to be authentically true to her story. On this point, she

---

20 This and all subsequent quotes from the autobiography are my translation from Arabic.
does reflect the larger canon of women’s autobiographical literature: as women ‘seek to authenticate themselves in stories’ (Smith & Watson, 1998, pg. 9), they reveal ‘a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding’ (Jelinek, 1980, pg. 15, cited in Smith & Watson, 1998, pg. 9).

**Evidence and Analysis: Wanisi’s Islamic Feminism**

Wanisi embraced the ideology of Ibn Badis’ free schools which later became the anthem of the revolution and nationalist battle cry: ‘Islam is our religion, Arabic is our language and Algeria our fatherland.’ This raises several relevant questions for the analysis of her autobiography: How did this ideology shape her life and work? What do Islam, Arabic language and culture, and Algeria mean to her? How is this ideology expressed through her autobiography? And how did it inform her brand of Islamic feminist writings, discourse, and practices?

Wanisi’s autobiography is largely about Algerian nationalism and how it is informed by religion, cultural traditional, colonial history, and revolution, from her gendered perspective. Although it was written 50 years after independence was won, I view her work with a postcolonial lens, treating the text as postcolonial autobiographical literature which takes the premise that the postcolonial context has shaped the autobiography (Anishchenkova, 2014). I follow Anishchenkova, who defined postcolonial autobiographical literature as ‘works where the autobiographical construction is informed by continuous negotiations between colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial discourses on both thematic and linguistic levels’ (pg. 38).

In her text, Wanisi describes her view of the autobiography as a relationship between the personal and the public, with narration playing a definitive role. As she explains, initially, the autobiography is a document of her lived personal experiences with both personal and public events. At this stage, it is owned by her as the autobiographer. It represents one version of the historical record of her time, unique to her vision and reactions to events. In this process of documentation, she strives to remain critical, attempting to be authentic and aware of the self and the other, examining both with a critical eye. She also strives to reconnect with the next generation
and to bear in mind that no experience is trivial; what may seem small to her may be considered a landmark by the generations that follow. Once this document is narrated, it takes on an altogether different form, with different ownership. At this point, it becomes part of the collective memory. She sees it as owned by the next generations and subjected to historical evaluation, which may result in her being idolised and romanticised or demonised.

Women’s Issues

Wanisi dedicated herself to women’s issues throughout her life through the intersecting roles she played as a teacher, politician, editor of a women’s magazine, writer, and revolutionary. For her, both teaching and writing were always expressions of activism. She narrated that her best and most difficult times are the ones she spent in writing for the Algerian magazine because writing itself was an act of activism. She wrote, ‘I discovered that I carry a mission: an intellectual revolutionary struggle’ (pg. 322) This mission needs her knowledge of the reality of the vast geographies and histories of the nation and the plight of women (Wanisi 2012, pg. 322). Speaking about her autobiography, she wrote: ‘I decided to break all taboos in this autobiography and say everything honestly because this autobiography is a social document, belonging to the women and society’ (pg. 143).

She began her writing career in Al-Baṣā’ir at the age of 17, encouraged by Tawfiq Al-Madani, a famous Algerian historian. This magazine was associated with the Islamic reformist movement led by Ibn Badis. She would receive feedback on her writing from male writers and would engage in dialogue with them through her writings. She wrote her first collection of short stories which became part of a volume edited by Suhair Qalamawi in Egypt and wrote the volume’s introduction. These stories highlighted the plight of Algerian family relationships during colonialism and the impacts of colonialism on women.

During the revolution, she wrote her first memoir, Yawmiyyāt Mudarrisa Ḥurra (From the Diary of a Free Female Teacher) in 1978. It narrated her role as a school teacher at a very young age in the free schools. She recounted how she transformed the school into a battlefield because of
how colonialism invaded her classroom. The memoir shows how she used her teaching career as a means to continue her activism by fighting illiteracy and backwards thinking about women and girls. After independence, she used her position as editor of *The Algerian Woman* to write numerous commentaries in the magazine, particularly in response to the Black Decade. She wrote: ‘I used to make interviews with the mujāhidāt especially the marginalised ones in the mountains, with female artists, working women, female teachers, and housewives during exhausting field surveys’ (pg. 324)

After a long literary and political career, she wrote her memoir, *‘Abra  Az-Zuhūr wa Al-A’šhwāk: masār ‘imrāā’a (Through Flowers and Thorns, a woman’s journey)* (2012). In it, she discussed her political and literary career and responded to moments where she was silenced and marginalised. One such moment in her political career where she could not defend herself at the time was when she was blamed ‘indirectly’ by President Chadli Bendjedid for her son’s new car during Black October of 1988, when people were protesting against government corruption. The memoir itself is written for the purpose of recording her view of reality as a form of historical testimony—a personal version of truth and reality among many other versions. She confessed that hers was not a complete one, a recognition that made her consider writing yet another memoir in an interview on *Al-Fajr* newspaper.

For Wanisi, her memoir represented a mission to protect the collective popular memory, to keep it alive. She also saw it as a means to continue the Arabic and Islamic nationalist history which has undergone many distortions and attacks by what she considers neo-colonial powers which aim to misrepresent history and create a gap between the history of her generation and the younger generation. There is an ongoing debate between nationalist historians and historians who are more pro-Western in their approach to history, informed by postmodernism. There is also a call by historians for history to be written in Algeria as historians like Malika Rahal argue that history stops at 1962 (Vince 2015).

About gender roles Wanisi wrote:
I do not carry a feminist thinking and I do not want to be a man or like a man. Who said the man is my ideal/role model? My role model is, in reality, to be a human. I want to be myself as Allah has created me with my strength and my weaknesses...All I want is to be respected by man as I respect him and he protects my rights as I protect his rights...He respects me as a woman yes, but a woman who has brains exactly as I respect him as a person who has brains. Al-Muru’a (sense of honour) must be the shared factor between us and not femininity or masculinity. (pg. 318)

She wrote extensively about feminist issues, dedicating an entire chapter to the theme expressed in the above quote, entitled, ‘A Brain/Mind Lives in a Woman’. There, she stressed that she wanted to be recognised as a woman and respected as a woman who has a brain. She wrote that she never wished to act like a man to merit recognition or to feel perfect. She engaged a range of subjects concerning the well-being of women, such as the marginalisation of women in the poorest areas of Algeria, away from urban centres and thus easily forgotten. ‘I write about marginalised women in the mountains...’ is a phrase found in multiple places in her memoir where resistance to marginalisation as a woman represented a key theme in her memoir. She sensitively wrote about the various forms of marginalisation she faced in her life—as a woman writer, as a colonised and postcolonial Arab woman writer, and as a Muslim Arab woman writer. Thus, she recognised that her marginalisation (alongside many women in her society) is in fact multilayered. She wrote about practical concerns of women, such as birth control and family planning. She urged women to have fewer children and ensure sufficient time between births. In this, she endorsed the state’s position which encouraged this as a solution to the population growth during the 1970s.

She also took a strong stance against mixed marriages, particularly between Algerians and French, since they were the former colonisers. Mixed marriage was but one of many controversial issues she discussed in her writings and raised in her speech in the Islamic conference she attended. Her opposition to mixed marriages stirred a backlash from Algerian women married to Frenchmen; one woman writer described her as having ‘the black malevolence’, as Wanisi cited in her memoir. Given the strong nationalist and anti-colonialist position she maintained throughout her life, her rejection of Algerians marrying French could be interpreted as another way of resisting neocolonial domination, in line with the ‘ulama’and Ibn Badis’ resistance to colonialism by rejecting French
nationality and issuing a *fatwa* prohibiting people from seeking it as he wrote in *Al-Basa’ir* in January 1938 (as cited in Bouhind, 2012).

Wanisi’s participation in the revolution as a mujāhidā was a formative experience for her, and, as demonstrated through her writings, framed her understanding of the rights, positions, and capabilities of women in society and thus her form of feminism. In the first article of *The Algerian Woman*’s first volume in January 1970, she wrote:

> This step will empower women by trespassing the narrow frames she was confined to and reach out for a pro-creative life…This is a logical result for her participation in the great liberation revolution and making the present we live in and the future we are looking for. (as cited in Wanisi, 2012, pg. 319)

Thus, for Wanisi, women have rightly earned their empowerment through hard-fought struggle and sacrifices they made to defend Algeria prior to and during the revolution. Here, she challenges claims arguing that such empowerment was, ultimately, given as a gift by men. Recalling ‘myths in the collective memory’ of other women fighters such as Al-Kahina and Lalla Fatma Nsoumer, Wanisi insists that women’s empowerment was handily won through women’s history of struggles for the nation, and that they deserve empowerment and to sit in the highest positions of the liberated nation state. This is why she sees her own advancement into politics as a natural right given by the revolution and why she believes that women should join the military. Writing extensively on the matter, she departed from the popular position that men are the defenders of both land and women, arguing instead that the love of one’s land and desire to defend it is not the exclusive domain of men, nor their honour.

As a writer, while she maintained a strong emphasis on gender, women’s issues, and relations between men and women, Wanisi also had a sharp eye for class and ethnic dynamics. She understood, for example, how colonialism constructed a class divide between coloniser and colonised; from a young age, she was alert to lifestyle differences that revealed this divide. Moreover, she came from a poor family and lower class in society, but it was not the case for her ancestors, who descended from the upper classes to poverty as a result of colonialism, as was the
case with many families and tribes who were displaced and deprived of their possessions. Coming from that class enabled her to be sympathetic and sensitive to poor women’s issues which were often caused by illiteracy and backward mentality. For example, when a girl came to her class crying about her father anticipating divorcing her mother because she ‘insists on’ only giving birth to girls, she remembered her own similar experience and how her aunt used to blame her mother for giving birth only to girls. She identifies herself at the beginning of the memoir as ‘the repeated number’ as the title of her second chapter because she was the fourth girl among five before her mother gave birth to two boys. If it was not for her father’s belief in Ibn Badis’s reformist agenda and love of his girls to send them to school, she would have been confined and trained to be a good housewife as other girls of her age.

She also narrated how the relationship between Arab and Jewish Algerians was altered by colonialism, which created rifts that were not present before, when Jews were well-integrated into Algerian society, participated in Arab cultural ceremonies, and were virtually identical to Arabs in terms of dress and cuisine.

**Wanisi as a Political Figure**

Wanisi wrote extensively about the significance of the revolution for Algerian women:

The November revolution was in reality a source of power [yanbú] which enabled women to change their marginalized presence and retrieve their lost power. It purified the heart and the tongue, and alleviated the mind, and the behavior. It marginalized, though for a period of time only, sick backward thinking towards women and their roles as a human being who must have complete rights and obligations. (pg. 183)

She attempted to document all the women’s roles during the seven-year war of liberation. Despite the vast amount of writing surrounding women’s efforts and suffering in anticolonial struggles which she collected, she still did not consider what she did as ‘historicisation of all women’s activism and activities in Algeria, it is only my reality during the revolution’ (pg. 182). She continued:
In these marginal feelings, which have no relation to the process of historicization, I do not claim that I will make the reader of these stations [moments] discover a holistic truth, nor the grand truth, and I only lived my life, this short life and no more. (pg. 182)

She recognised that her life was remarkable because she lived during the revolution, that the revolution deeply affected her life and the lives of generations to come. The revolution pushed her to an early maturity: ‘I started to be a woman since early childhood [fitām]’ (pg. 181). She was also against the idea that women merely played complementary roles to men in the revolution: ‘My role with my mates was complementary to the roles of other activists and mujāhidāt who preceded us in age and stages of life’ (pg. 181). If there is any real complementarity, she only recognised the complementarity among women and their sacrifices from past to present. She recognised the complementarity between the diversity of roles and services women provided in different locations, such as the women in urban areas complementing the work done by women in the villages and mountains. She acknowledged, however, that rural women who participated in the revolution did suffer from greater marginalisation after independence and did not enjoy the same rights as their urban sisters because they were not aware of them or downplayed their own participation. She also recognised the complementary efforts of the Arab women who supported the revolution materially and emotionally and those of women who were part of the anticolonial movement around the world. She rejected the idea that women need to ‘rest’, as suggested to her by a male revolutionary, commenting that:

As if women’s sacrifices and participation and martyrdom for the sake of her country’s freedom were a debt from her to men...because he is supposed to fight and act alone. I imagined him to be monopolizing the love of country and longing for freedom and all beautiful ideas and works/acts. (pg. 187)

She maintained her solidarity with women who held different views from her, such as the Algerian feminist writer Assia Djebar. When she was blamed ‘being the daughter of Ibn Badis’ for giving Djebar her shawl as a sign of respect for her in a ceremony celebrating Djebar’s work in France (it was expected for them to be enemies as they write in different languages and are in opposing camps of a cultural war between Arabophones and Francophones), she simply responded,
She was Algerian, I am Algerian’. She also noticed that Djebar’s attitude and discourse warmed towards Islam and Arab culture in her later works.

One can classify Wanisi as simultaneously an Islamic reformist and nationalist feminist, in which she strove to be a good citizen and a good Muslim woman at once, revealing how Islam, politics, and women’s rights are intertwined for her. In her view, she has participated in two jihâds: while the jihâd for independence from France was successfully completed, the jihâd to build a nation state, which is the biggest and hardest struggle, remains unfinished. She claims that writing Ibn Badis’ biography was a political act because it was important for her to keep his legacy alive and defend the reformist agenda for society to which he dedicated his life. She argued in an interview that his reformist agenda was more elaborate and ambitious than that of Muhammad Abdu because Ibn Badis’s vision was from the people, for the people—as demonstrated by his free schools which targeted girls and the poor—while Abdu’s was only supported by the elites. The free schools were widely supported by the people precisely because they supported his ideas. This is why people would donate land for the schools and volunteer their labour to build them. Ibn Badis worked tirelessly every day to educate both the young and the elderly—the former in the mornings and the latter in the evenings. Both Wanisi and her father were among the pupils in his free schools and her father, in particular, was extensively educated by Ibn Badis. A staunch supporter of Ibn Badis to this day, Wanisi insists that the education, a coeducational one, she received in the free schools was modern and moderate, and that her positions are also moderate as a result. She further claimed that if Algerians had maintained his reformist agenda and held onto his legacy, they would not have suffered through the Black Decade, for such extremism would not have emerged in the moderate society Ibn Badis envisioned and attempted to build.

She also participated in building up civil society to defend women’s rights through her efforts to establish the women’s union, UNFA, and the women’s magazine, The Algerian Woman. In these activities, we see how writing intersected with her politics and activism. She used both UNFA and the magazine as platforms to stage calls for women’s empowerment and share her
feminist ideas through writing. In her memoir, she dedicated an entire chapter to her experience as editor-in-chief of *The Algerian Woman*. She wrote:

We were women, meeting every night after our daily jobs where we earn a living. Most of us were working as teachers or in the administrative roles…There were many of us at that stage [in 1966]. Some knew each other well, while others were meeting for the first time. We were different in a lot of matters. Among us were women who were educated in Arabic while others were educated in French, so one would speak Arabic, another would speak French and another yet who would not speak neither this or that. Among us, some had conservative affiliations, others liberal, some moderate and some had no affiliation at all. This is how I classify them today [in 2011, writing her memoir]. But at that time, it did not cross our minds that we were different. We were revolutionaries, *mujahidat*, belonging to (and identifying with) the army and FLN which liberated the country. We were lucky, more so than other women, because we were able to celebrate our liberation and did not die before [it was achieved]. Maybe our perspectives on life were different but our mission was one in the name of the revolution: working towards alleviating women's positions. Its leadership, directing in this sensitive stage, which needs the woman more than the past, we raise the banner: ‘Liberation is not an end, it is a means for more important ends, the only hero is the people’. (pg. 203-204)

Wanisi takes pride in her knowledge of Arabic and her education which provided it. She wrote that ‘I was the only one nearly who had strong knowledge of Arabic [among the group of women in UNFA] and the one who had beautiful handwriting’ (pg. 204). She would write banners in Arabic and then comment, ‘Arabic is a sign of gaining back our identity and authority because the Latin letters were dominating on every front’ (pg. 204).

She spoke of how the activism of UNFA members led to many successes on local, national, and international levels and that her own participation as an activist was an important experience for her, shaping her class and gender consciousness:

This activism helped me to stay close to the different classes of society and the problems of male and female citizens and crystallized their problems and demands [pains and hopes]. Grassroots work is an identity, interest, and honor and we should not neglect people’s issues because they are our only legitimacy and the source of our victories. (pg. 205)

In the above quote, Wanisi differs from other FLN leaders who argue that their political legitimacy comes from their revolutionary past at a time they claim that the revolution was ‘by the people, for the people.’

Wanisi took issue with the term ‘feminism’, insisting it represented a Western ideology. She boldly claimed, ‘I have never had a feminist ideology’ and ‘I do not believe that women have
separate issues, then society should defend women’s issues and women’s issues alone’ (pg. 317). Her refusal to identify with feminism echoes many Muslim women and others who made similar disclaimers—‘I am not a feminist’—before proceeding to speak like a feminist. She identified more with the Ibn Badis’ reformist moment and the nationalist revolution led by the FLN which made her resemble other leading feminists in the Arab world, such as Huda Sha’rāwī, the pioneering Egyptian feminist leader, nationalist, and founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union who worked during the first half of the 20th century. Her resistance to the label of feminism also demonstrates that identifying with feminism is much more complex than identifying with religious reformation or a particular racial or ethnic group, especially when such forms of identification were critical to fighting the colonial powers and liberating one’s land. For example, fasting, which is a religious ritual, was associated with resistance for many Muslim Algerians. Wanisi narrated in her memoir that when she and other Algerian women delegates traveled to attend a woman’s conference during Ramadan, they were astonished to see other Muslim women eating.

Despite her resistance to the term ‘feminism’, it is clear in her work and writings that she was very much supportive of feminists and a feminist herself at her core. Throughout her writings, she reveals her particular feminist viewpoint and approach:

My conviction is that I have an objective and logical point of view where I concentrate on the position of women within that little frame which is the family. Then in that big milieu which is society. A society that has its specialization, history, culture, and outlook for modernization and modernity for both men and women. The family as a unit should remain strong and united, filled with mutual respect and governed by mercy and justice because it is an important pillar of building a society that every Muslim Arab person aims for and looks forward to. (pg. 318)

In this quote, we see how the reformist ethos is reflected in her beliefs but at the same time, she claimed to not side with the women or that women have no special issues of their own. Implicitly, what she claims that the family needs is in fact what women are demanding: justice, respect, and compassion. It very well may be that she strategically chose to use the discourse of the family, rather than focusing on women, in order to have her message accepted by her target audience.
Her reformist ethos can also be seen in her participation in negotiations over the family code in her various political roles—as a member of UNFA, parliament, and the FLN party. As mentioned earlier, she described her positions as moderate and in accordance with Algerian authenticity, by which she means Islamic and Arabic culture, a cornerstone of Ibn Badis’ reformist ideology. She argued that Algeria does not want to impose the family code in a top down process like Tunisia, where people found ways to abuse laws imposed on them. She wrote that throughout the stages of negotiations around the Family Code Law from the 1970s until the 1990s, she reached the conclusion that the middle path is the best option…and that our religion was and is based on the middle path which takes into consideration the individual and the society’s interests. The problem is not in our Islamic texts but the problem is in some of the religious men’s mentality who are against ijtihad: independent reasoning to find solutions for present day legal questions, as an important source for Sharia Law today…I have tried to push for a family law that is authentic to Algerian people on one hand and against all kinds of discrimination and injustices against women on the other hand. I was debating in the National Assembly around these issues depending on Islam and its spirit which is following a middle path (moderation) but was unable to convince the radicals on the right or on the left who often cared more about their own interests. Compared to the middle path which is Islam’s essence ask us to follow, those radicals are choosing the easiest way.

Wanisi as an Educator

Wanisi’s role as a teacher is rarely discussed in her works. Yet it is clear that her schooling, experiences as a teacher, and views on education informed her activism, writing, and political career. In turn, she used these various roles to support education in various ways, achieving important advances for teachers and students and the Algerian education system.

During her tenure as a teacher in the free schools, she saw education as a battlefield against marginalisation, and in her position as a teacher, she fought both women’s illiteracy and French colonialism. When the French closed her school, she confronted the colonial administration. She helped the mujāhidīn through her school, always deceiving the colonial administrators into thinking that her school was nothing more than a Qur’anic school. Whenever they would raid her school to check on their activities, she would quickly have the girls, who already know what they should do, read ‘Surat Al Shams’ from the Qur’ān. Her first memoir was about her role as a young teacher in the Free School where she taught on the meaning of Algerianness and how, for her, education is a
source of empowerment and social and class mobility. Her school was at once ‘a school for education and a centre for freedom fighters fīdāʿīyyīn where they hide on rare occasions from colonial powers’ (pg. 166). She also used to perform her revolutionary mission secretly from inside the school.

After independence, Wanisi worked to improve education in Algeria in various ways. She was among the few who actively worked to arabise the education system and called for Arabisation. She was also part of a committee which aimed to develop and improve education in Algeria. Later, she became the Minister of Education and Culture, which she always considered to be the domain nearest to her heart. As Minister, she enabled women teachers to work for civil society by instituting a retirement policy and supported women’s maternity leave. This was inspired by her own experiences where she was working as an activist in the evening and as a teacher in the morning to support herself. She was aware of all the challenges to activists because she experienced them herself. She also helped to resolve the problems faced by other teachers of the free schools who were marginalised after independence. The school where she worked and taught later on reflected the ideas and legacy of Ibn Badis. She encouraged her students—among them Aḥlam Mostghanemi, the acclaimed Arabic language novelist, and Inam Bioudh—to write and would often publish their work in The Algerian Woman.

She also prioritised her own education. She refused to follow other women who were easily given positions within the government after independence when there was a shortage of Algerians to fill in the gap left by the French administrators, determined to continue her education first. Moreover, she refused educational opportunities outside Algeria: first, when she was in a delegation to Geneva during the war of liberation because she wanted to witness the liberation celebrations and another opportunity offered to her by Suhair Qalamawi to pursue her doctorate in Egypt. The high regard she has maintained for education reflects Ibn Badis’ reformist agenda, who, when asked why he refused to call for armed resistance against the colonial powers, replied that Algerians must prepare for liberation first through education. Following Ibn Badis, she argued that after liberation,
the new kind of resistance and activism must take place through education. So, while Wanisi is clearly a nationalist, hers is a nationalism along the lines of the reformist legacy.

**Wanisi’s Intersectional Islamic Feminism**

In Zuhur Wanisi’s work, we see an intersection of the personal and the political. Through her autobiography, she demonstrates how social history shapes politics and one’s political positions. She actively endorsed a narrative approach that shows how gender, religion, class, ethnicity, education, language, as well as historical and socio-political contexts have all contributed to her intersectional worldview, feminism, and political positions. As a politician, she did not attempt to look at issues in a non-gendered way. And through all her different careers, she tried to subvert and resist gender inequality.

Her autobiography represents an intersection between text and context. The intersections of her political, literary, and activist careers which we read about in her autobiography are an emblem and reflection of other intersections—the historical and political contexts in which she lived and their various dimensions, including education, language, colonialism, the war of liberation, the civil war, and religion. Because religion is often marginalised from feminist discourse in the Middle East and North Africa, it is problematic to assume a clear demarcation between what we might call ‘secular’ and ‘Islamic’ feminists. Upon closer examination, the work of these feminists reveals a more complex picture regarding the roles that religion, faith, and religious identity play in their feminist practices and activism. While it may be convenient to classify them in a binary fashion, there are many intersecting grounds to be discovered.

In the case of Wanisi, the Islamic reformist agenda inspired by her upbringing and education in the Muslim free schools of Ibn Badis continued to inform the feminist positions she expressed and defended in her writing throughout her life. As a feminist, she participated in creating and documenting a nationalist history, and is critical of that history. She manifested what Cooke (2003) called ‘multiple critique’ by critiquing serious faults done by the FLN that led to people’s anger towards them. She was keen on making sure that this nationalist history does not ignore gender and
the role of women, pushing back against the tendency to imagine that the revolution was led by men alone and that the country is sustained by the work of men alone. Wanisi was well aware that women’s participation in the revolution could be easily forgotten; this is why she was and still is keen on documenting her own and other women’s stories and struggles. While she was raised with Islamic values, she sees no contradiction between women’s empowerment and her religion. If Wanisi is not an ‘Islamic feminist’ in the way that the term has come to be defined, then she certainly provides us with an alternative form of feminism that is informed by a unique subjectivity.
CHAPTER 3: SAUDI ARABIA’S ISLAMIC FEMINISM: THE CAMPAIGNS AND E-ACTIVISM OF MANAL AL-SHARIF

INTRODUCTION

The intersections of religion, gender, and politics are central to analysing feminism in Saudi Arabia. As a monarchy with a council of ministers, it is an Islamic country, embracing the legal, economic, and social precepts of Islam in which, under Islamic law, men and women have basic legal rights in a variety of spheres (Al-Munajjed, 1997). However, it is important to note that there are also a set of social norms and customs that originate in different communities within the society but are often misunderstood as mandated by Islam. Al-Munajjed describes the political structure in Saudi Arabia as ‘a unique blend of tribal custom and religious law’ citing the country’s ‘strong roots in both religious and tribal history’ (1997, p. 3).

I contend that, given the contextual nature of the relationships between religion, gender, and politics, the particular manifestations of Islamic feminisms that arise in Saudi Arabia will be distinctly Saudi, by which I mean that they will emerge from a Saudi historical, political, and cultural context and be oriented towards and constrained by Saudi authorities and Saudi society. I further contend that these Islamic feminisms will be diverse in that the Saudi women driving them constitute a diverse group of individuals, giving rise to diverse interests along the lines of class, ethnicity, religious identity, and other personal identities and social positions. If there are defining features of the body of feminisms practiced in Saudi Arabia, they would be its diversity and division and its e-activism.

In this chapter, I analyse the activism of Manal Al-Sharif, the Saudi woman behind the 2011 revival of the Women’s Right to Drive campaign in Saudi Arabia, using her memoir, *Daring to Drive* (2017), and other writing and speeches as a case study. I provide a nuanced intersectional analysis in order to showcase Al-Sharif’s activism and what I call ‘e-activism’ as unique forms of Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia. I also do so in order to better understand the role of Islam in Al-Sharif’s identity as a Muslim woman, and how this plays into her Islamic feminist ideology and
practices as they intersect with the cultural institutions of media, education, and gender. By focusing on one story, that of Manal Al-Sharif, in all the rich textures she offers through her memoir and other writing, we are better able to understand what it means for Al-Sharif that she is a Saudi Muslim woman. Tracing the gendered, religious, and political dimensions of the history of the modern Saudi state as they overlap and intersect with Al-Sharif’s personal history and life story, I argue that Al-Sharif is an Islamic feminist representing one of a range of expressions of Islamic feminisms in Saudi Arabia.

In doing so, I provide a case with which to compare and contrast Zuhur Wanisi, whose life, work, and writing, amounting to a distinctly Algerian Islamic feminism, were the focus of the last chapter. Here, we will see how the Saudi context has shaped Al-Sharif’s life and activism in similar kinds of ways. The case of Saudi Arabia offers us the opportunity to see how women’s activism, particularly forms that could be considered Islamic feminist, adapts to a very different set of constraints than those faced by women activists in Algeria. The solution that has emerged in Saudi Arabia took women’s activism online with the introduction of the Internet into the country in the early 2000s, perhaps the most important feature of Saudi women’s activism today. In this chapter, I will show how social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have revealed particular forms of feminism operating in cyberspace, many of which could be argued to be Islamic. First, I will provide a brief historical overview of Saudi Arabia, focusing on the period of state formation from 1932 and the periods that followed up until today, in order to then situate the case of Manal Al-Sharif and her activism to overturn the ban on women drivers in proper historical perspective.

**BACKGROUND: A BRIEF HISTORY OF SAUDI ARABIA: RELIGION, GENDER, AND POLITICS WITHIN THE KINGDOM**

In this section, I aim to situate Saudi Arabia in historical perspective by providing an overview of Saudi Arabia’s history since state formation in 1932. I apply an intersectional framework to this historical overview by paying particular attention to the cultural, political, economic, religious, ethnic, and gendered spheres of life and how they have interacted and
transformed over time. In doing so, I will show that, given the particular historical trajectory that Saudi Arabia has followed, the institutions of gender, religion, and politics have become intertwined, shaping the lives of Saudi women in fundamental ways. I will also show how they form the foundation from which distinctly Saudi Islamic feminisms emerge, with Muslim women feminist activists engaging with Islam in various ways in their activist work and directing their work at Saudi authorities and Saudi society.

**Wahhabism: What is it?**

Saudi Arabia is home to the holiest cities for Muslims, Makkah and Madinah, the birthplaces of Islam in its western part. This fact gives Islam a special position within Saudi context. However, Saudi Arabia is more associated with Wahhabism in the literature written by the West. The beginnings of the modern Saudi state lie in the alliance between Muhammad bin Sa’ud and Muhammad bin ʿAbdul-Wahhab. The arrangement made between political power as exemplified in the the ʿamīr, and the religious establishment exemplified by the ʿimām, was designed to ensure that Saudi Arabia, as a state, would remain an Islamic kingdom consistent with the roots of its foundation in 1744. Many scholars attempt to define Wahhabism. Saudis do not use the term because it implies that Wahhabism is a new sect in Islam (Ibrahim, 2002) and Saudis largely consider it a revivalist call (*daʿwa*) back to monotheism (Moussalli, 2009), calling ‘for sociomoral reconstruction of society’ (Esposito, 2003, pg. 123). Others use the term to indicate a particularly austere and ultraconservative type of Islamic practice (Juergensmeyer & Roof, 2011, pg. 1369). The clerics were keen to ensure that the kingdom was built on pious public conduct in the manner of the Pious Ancestors, the Prophet Muhammed’s first followers—this is the heart of Wahhabi interpretations of the Qurʾan and other Islamic holy texts (more commonly referred to as Salafist and sometimes used interchangeably) (Holoch & Lacroix, 2011). The religious authorities have wielded tremendous legal and ideological power since the formation of the modern state in 1936, but not without periods of contention and confrontations with the king and the royal family, women
activists, and groups such as writers. Arguably, the various royal decrees and *fatawa* issued over the years regarding women’s conduct and rights, including the ban on women drivers, the male guardianship system, and bars on women voting and serving in public office, all were made possible because of the historical alliance between the clerics and the royal family.

However, since then Saudi Arabia has often merely been seen through the lens of Wahhabism and everything explained in that light which neglects the social, religious, and gender complexity of Saudi Arabia. As Holoch and Lacroix (2011, pg. 6) put it: ‘the cultural approach treats the Saudi cultural corpus as a homogeneous and coherent whole, reducible to a Wahhabism with well-defined characteristics’. Wahhabism—bearing in mind that this term is not endorsed by Saudis—as a movement should not be considered monolithic or static given its various forms of involvement with state formation and state politics.

**Saudi State Formation (1902-1932)**

In 1902, King ’Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud returned from exile in Kuwait and seized Riyadh, the ancestral home of his familial House of Sa‘ud, with a band of 60 men (Commins, 2015). Influenced by stories told him when he was young by his Aunt Jawhara bint Faisal when they were in Kuwait, King ’Abd al-‘Aziz spoke of ancestral claims, restoring and expanding the original Al Sa‘ud rule, and reestablishing his family’s authority over territories once incorporated under Saudi leadership (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Keeping the memory of a lost homeland and leadership alive, Jawhara bint Faisal was one of the driving forces behind King ’Abd al-‘Aziz’s return to reclaim the land of his forefathers from where they were forced into exile. She continued to play the role of advisor to the king until her death around 1930. However, her role is rarely highlighted in historical narratives.

With both ancestral and religious ideologies facilitating King ’Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud’s expansion, he became the Sultan of Najd the year after seizing Riyadh. Many of King ’Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud’s military successes were made possible because of the aid of the Brethren, called *ikhwān* in Arabic (AlRasheed, 2010; Commins, 2015). The *ikhwān* were Bedouin tribesmen ‘who agreed to

---

21 Ghazi Al-Gusaibi, a famous Saudi male writer, is one example.
abandon their nomadic way of life and settle in agricultural colonies [known as ḥaḍar], where they became avid pupils of Wahhabi clerics’ (Commins, 2015, p. 32). King ‘Abd al-ʿAziz enlisted the support of the ḥaḍar communities’ mutawwwaʿā (religious ritual specialists) to help him form a tribal army composed of ikhwān soldiers (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

While the ikhwān were a critical military asset, enabling King ‘Abd al-ʿAziz Ibn Saʿud’s victories in the Hijaz and elsewhere in Arabia, they were also a wild card. The ikhwān’s commitment to jihād clashed with King ‘Abd al-ʿAziz Ibn Saʿud’s own geopolitical concerns, leading to internal divisions with Saʿud’s forces. After the Saudi capture of the Hijaz, the ikhwān declared jihād against tribesmen in Iraq and Transjordan, two of the territories under the protection of the British.

Given how Wahhabi doctrine facilitated the consolidation of the Saudi state by helping King ‘Abd al-ʿAziz Ibn Saʿud and his forces bring territories under his rule, the new king was now obliged to uphold that doctrine. This means dividing power between the religious and political fields. Thus, the very basis for the legitimacy of rule in Saudi Arabia is that it upholds the divine law of Islamic sharīʿa (Vogel, 2000). The ideal of law in Saudi Arabia, and in many other Islamic legal systems, is that the law is the literal word of God as recorded in the Qur’an (Vogel, 2000).

Sharīʿa law became recognised as official law of the Saudi court system. The Saudi rulers thus share leadership with the Wahhabi ʿulamāʾ whereby Al Saʿud ʿensures the security and welfare of the population and upholds a moral public order defined by Islamic principles’ while the ʿulamaʾ ‘counsel the rulers on the details of Islamic principles’ and offer private advice (rather than in public, to avoid disorder and division) in the case of any deviation or violation of those principles (Commins, 2015, p. 38). This arrangement has led to a division of labor and power in which the Al Saʿud have ‘delegated education, law, religious life, and morality to the religious establishment while retaining control over foreign relations, defense, internal security, the treasury, economic development, and petroleum affairs’ (Commins, 2015, p. 38). Going back in history to look at the establishment of this division is important because it highlights how gender and women’s issues
came to be a site of contestation between the two centres of power. This division creates moments of reluctance and compromises. At times, this has caused problems, such as the delay of women’s education and defining women’s roles only as being mothers or wives; in other times, this separation of power has presented opportunities, such as when political power takes women’s empowerment in its own hands.  

**Early Years (1932-1970): The Discovery of Oil**

In 1938, huge commercial quantities of oil were discovered under the desert territories of alHasa. The sudden influx of massive revenues generated incredible wealth for the kingdom, leading to rapid modernization. This oil wealth delivered the economic independence and sustainability needed to fully consolidate the Saudi state. Yet the oil brought with it new dilemmas; namely, ‘how to benefit from oil wealth while remaining faithful to Islam and tradition’ (Al-Rasheed, 2010, pg. 34). The answer, as mentioned above, was to divide of the fields of power.

Oil has remained the principle, and abundant, source of revenue for the country since 1938 and thus has been the backbone of the Saudi economy. The oil wealth brought about a series of changes. The modernisation process accelerated with oil price increases in the early 1970s, which led to ‘extremely rapid economic and material evolution, with the construction of schools, universities, houses and a very advanced communication system’ (Al-Munajjed, 1997, pg. 5). However, there was much work to be done to build up government institutions and other necessary infrastructure, both material and ideological, for Saudi Arabia to become a fully consolidated and functional state.

The nascent oil industry at the beginning of Saudi statehood highlighted yet another pressing challenge faced by its leaders: the lack of qualified, educated professionals. Because there were so few Saudis with the technical expertise needed to develop its oil industry, King ’Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn  

---

22 This manifested with a speech (in 2013) addressed to Shura Council by late King ’Abd-Allah addressing women by adopting “Lā tahmīsh” (no more marginalisation) policy and opening opportunities for women in Shura Council and municipal elections, in education abroad, job, and economic opportunities.
Sa’ud was forced to bring in foreign workers to help build the industry, including American geologists and engineers who worked for American companies, despite the conflicts it posed to Wahhabi doctrine which banned infidels (Commins, 2015).

The pressing need for trained administrators and civil servants and technicians to support the petroleum sector led to pressure to create a modern education system (Commins, 2015). The Education Directorate was established in 1926 to supervise boys’ education (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). It was then transformed into the Ministry of Education, established in 1953, which set out to build schools across the country, raise enrollment, and improve literacy rates. Pressure mounted in the 1950s from educated Saudis to create girls’ schools. During this period, girls could only access education which was organised in private homes (Katāṭib) or in private institutions. Princess Iffat, wife of Crown Prince Faisal, took up the cause of girls’ education in royal circles. In 1956, she opened a private girls’ school in Jeddah (Commins, 2015). This was met with vehement opposition not only by religious authorities but also by ordinary people. In Buraydah, a protest opposing women’s education was put down by the government (Lacy, 1981).

When Crown Prince Faisal announced plans to establish public schools for girls, religious leaders opposed the plans, objecting ‘to the prospect of girls leaving their homes without their families’ (Commins, 2015, pg. 53). As the Qur’an does not prohibit education for girls, a royal decree in 1959 proposed a compromise. It placed girls’ education under a special government body, the General Presidency for the Education of Girls, headed by the Mufti, the leader of religious establishment (boys’ education remained under the Ministry of Education), in order to give religious control over curriculum design and staffing (Al-Suwaida, 2016). The decree stipulated that girls would study subjects suitable to becoming good mothers and homemakers, including the Qur’an, religious subjects, homemaking, and childrearing (Commins, 2015; Yamani, 2000). The decree also assured families that they retained the right to keep their daughters home if they wished. The first government-funded girls’ schools opened in 1960, including 15 primary schools and one teacher training institute, enrolling 5,810 girls in its first year (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). Girls and women
belonging to the upper classes were the first to seize this opportunity (Hamdan, 2005). The construction of both intermediate schools and a primary school for girls followed in 1963.

The 1957 establishment of Riyadh University (now King Saud University [KSU]) marked the birth of higher education in Saudi Arabia (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). While the first university for women was not opened until 1970, women were permitted to attend Riyadh University as irregular ‘part-time’ students at the Colleges of Arts and Administrative Sciences (Jamjoom & Kelly 2013).

According to Holoch and Lacroix (2011), the 1960s marked the institutionalisation of religion. Yet, the state maintained a degree of control over the religious establishment through the 1970s (Delong-Bas, 2013). In practice, this meant that the religious establishment was marginalised in political and economic decision making and also in some internal matters such as turning a blind eye to the sociocultural changes they would consider prohibited such TV, music, singing, and other activities they considered ‘westernisation’. But the religious establishment also pursued their own agenda. They established religious universities. Medina University became a centre for Islamic studies, attracting large numbers of non-Saudi Muslims. And the government cooperated in these efforts, formulating a common policy for secular and religious universities: that the purpose of higher education was to advance and defend Islam (Commins, 2015). Since then, higher education has been divided between secular and religious institutions, with the former preparing students for careers in the petroleum sector, public administration, and business, and the latter, for careers as religious court judges, muftīs, preachers, and teachers of religious subjects. This created two ideologies within society which in the 1980s led to an intellectual clash, with those who called themselves the modernists (ḥadāthiyyīn/mustanīrīn) labeling their opponents backward-looking and obscurantist (ẓalāmiyyīn/rajʿīyīn) in newspapers, universities, and in the mosques.

In 1970, the General Presidency for the Education of Girls established the first college for women in Riyadh, now called Princess Nora bint ‘Abdul-Rahman University, the world’s largest university for women. Over 100 more colleges for women were subsequently opened, ranging from university colleges to intermediary colleges and community colleges, distributed over 72 cities across Saudi Arabia (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). The Ministry of Higher Education, established in 1975, became responsible for planning, coordinating, and supervising Saudi Arabia’s higher education system. Later they were all incorporated under the Ministry of Education, which became responsible for all forms of education.

During the oil boom the state prepared developmental plans known as Five-Year Plans. This manifested in the rapid spread of modernisation, increase of consumption, decrease of censorship on TV, and the appearance of new intellectual ideologies in the newspaper; the younger generation was heading toward rebellion and westernisation. The boom, then, was responsible for decentralising the authority of the religious establishment, such as shifting the issuing of fatāwa from individuals to the Permanent Committee for Issuing Fatwa, and also weakening the role of religious censorship over the media and publications. Women also benefitted from the oil boom through the spread of girls’ education.

**Nationalism, Saudi Culture, and Cultural Diversity**

The new state was also faced with the challenge of creating a nation—a sense of socio-cultural cohesion and uniformity amidst the incredible diversity within Saudi Arabia. In the face of such diversity, the Saudi state engaged efforts in order to unify the nation, relying heavily on Islamic traditions (Al-Munajjed, 1997). Islam thus acts as a major force in determining the institutional norms, patterns, and structures of society. This is especially so since Islam is not only a religious ideology but a whole comprehensive social system embracing detailed prescriptions for the entire way of life (AlMunajjed, 1997, pg. 9).

Furthermore, Islam affects the ‘traditional position, obligations, and privileges’ of Saudi women (Al-Munajjed, 1997, pg. 9).
For some, this unification process has been seen as the “Najdisation” of Saudi Arabian culture and religion, imposing Najdi culture on the rest of the country (Delong-Bas, 2013; Yamani, 2004, 2008a). While Wahhabism, a product of Najdi culture, is commonly seen as a major influence on its dominant culture and the basis for the organisation of society in Saudi Arabia, Saudi culture is far from monolithic. It was an ethnically diverse set of territories based on tribal affiliation, both nomadic and sedentary prior to, and at the moment of, the consolidation of the Saudi state in 1932. Each of the four regions of Saudi Arabia—the Hijaz, Najd, ‘Asir, and al-Hasa—is home to tribal cultures that span centuries and that hold distinctive traditions and customs, including dress code, language, rules of conduct, religious practices, social ceremonies, and gender relations (Yamani, 2004). Some cultural differences have emerged out of rural versus urban life. For instance, in many rural villages and desert communities, women have been allowed to drive, do not wear black ‘abāya, and generally possess more freedom of mobility. Therefore, each region has a distinct gender system based on the norms of that region and what is expected or acceptable as proper behaviour or dress of both sexes.

One significant ethnic minority are the Bedouin, or ‘desert dwellers’, the nomadic group found primarily in one region in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghadeer, 2009; AlMunajjed, 1997), who have a rich cultural heritage often expressed through storytelling and oral poetry (Al-Ghadeer, 2009). The Hijazi represent another distinctive ethnic group. After the Hijaz region was incorporated into Saudi Arabia in 1932, the Hijazi ‘still retained a separate cultural consciousness, continuing to draw identity and stability from their sense of belonging to the cradle of Islam: Mecca and Medina’ (Yamani, 2004, pg. xii). The Hijaz and its inhabitants who enjoy prosperity as guardians of holy mosques ‘have always viewed themselves—and been viewed by others—as a kind of chosen people, whose links with the Muslim Holy Places give them a deep religious significance’ (Yamani, 2004, pg. 12). Over time, urban Hijazi elites have striven to maintain and highlight a distinct cultural identity, one that reflects, in part, a ‘highly developed cosmopolitan sophistication’ (Yamani, 2004, pg. 12).
Given the rich cultural diversity that existed at the time of state formation, a range of customs persisted in the early years of the Saudi state and continue up to today. Gender segregation, a Najdi custom, became strictly enforced by the kingdom by the Wahhabi clerics and the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Combating Vice (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004; Commins, 2015; Kurdi, 2014). Gender segregation had been customary among Najdi villagers, townsmen, and nomads for centuries, but variants of gender segregation were also practiced by numerous tribes on the Arabian Peninsula, such as the Bedouin and the Hijazi. The custom of gender segregation often emerges from the association of the concept of family with that of female honour and family honour predicated on the action of the female members of the household (Al-Munajjed, 1997; Yamani, 2004).

Traditionally, Bedouin women were shielded from men deemed strangers, only engaging in direct interaction with men who were relatives, although the set of permitted relatives was more extensive than under Wahhabi doctrine. They also maintained a symbolic separation between the women’s and men’s spheres by keeping to their side of the tent as part of the Bedouin code of honour. Bedouin women had their own set of responsibilities and share of work outside the home (Commins, 2015).

The Hijazi practiced a form of gender segregation that was less strict than Najdi custom (Yamani, 2004). For example, among the ‘awā’il, the network of Hijazi patronymic groups which constitute the Hijazi elite, mixed-gender evenings were common in which older women, considered guardians of Hijazi musical traditions, would regularly perform.

The custom of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is a reflection of Wahhabi doctrine, by which Wahhabi interpretations of Qur’anic verses pertaining to modesty and interaction between genders resulted in numerous *fatāwa* (Commins, 2015). Gender mixing in schools and most workplaces was not permitted in the early years of the Saudi state, with the exception of hospital clinics, medical schools, Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company, now Saudi Arabian Oil Company), and privately-owned companies. This segregation, which prohibits women from
interacting with unrelated men, is maintained through physical, social, and psychological means (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004). The practices of segregation and veiling hold several meanings of great significance for Saudi culture and some families who were previously not segregated embraced the practice as a return to Islamic teaching. Teenage girls would teach their mothers to stop mixing or talking directly to other relatives such as their father’s brothers because they were taught these standards at schools and their mothers sometimes appreciated that their daughters were teaching them the ‘true’ Islam. Al-Munajjed describes how gender segregation evolved into a nationalist value:

a measure taken by society to protect the chastity of women and prevent other men from encroaching on the male honor of the family. At the same time it is a sign of respect and decency, and of identification with the traditional and nationalistic values of Saudi culture. (1997, pg. 8)

A related custom practiced in the early years of the Saudi state was that of male guardianship. As part of the male guardianship system, women were not permitted to possess their own identity cards. Instead, they were registered under their father’s or husband’s identity cards, limiting their mobility and independence. Doaiji (2017) describes the male guardianship system as ‘a legal system under which women cannot marry, travel, work, access health care, or study without approval from waliyy al-‘amr, or guardian. Her guardian is typically either her husband or closest male relative, such as father, brother, or son’ (pg. 7-8).

The dress code in Saudi Arabia represents one of the most visible signs of Wahhabi influence (Commins, 2015). In the Wahhabi interpretation of the Qur’anic verses which discuss the rules for modest dress, women must cover their entire bodies, only allowing the eyes to show. The official Islamic dress code for women in Saudi Arabia has since been the black ‘abāya (robe) and the niqāb (face veil), a custom embraced by many Saudi women and enforced on others by the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Combating Vice. Like other cultural customs in Saudi Arabia, variation in dress code exists and it is not evenly enforced throughout the kingdom. For example, in some rural
areas, women do not don the black ‘

abāya. Some Hijazi women have also maintained their distinctive dress, characterized by the white head cover (Yamani, 2004). This regulation of dress later became a national as well as Islamic symbol for Saudi women who have to be protected as bearers of that symbol.


The progression of modernity was interrupted in 1979 which highlights the complexity of the relationship between political power and religious ‘ulamā’. The tensions between the Saudi state’s religious ideologies and political realities sparked dissent within the religious establishment which claimed that religious compromises had to be corrected and the extremists thought that the ‘ulamā’ were co-opted by the state. For example, before introducing modernisations and technologies such as television, women’s education, or even abolishing slavery, fatawa were issued by the prominent ‘ulama’ through the Permanent Committee for Issuing Fatawa to support those measures taken by the royal family. In this way they were considered by some as state agents ‘to check manifestations of religious radicalism’ (Nevo, 1998, pg. 38).

The siege of the Grand Mosque in 1979 marked a dramatic turning point in the Saudi state’s stance towards terrorism, Islam, and women (Delong-Bas, 2013). A year before the siege, in 1978, articles by male and female writers about increasing women’s rights in public life through giving them right to drive, as well as more educational opportunities, were being debated in newspapers (Doumato, 2000). A group of young religious men developed an extremist ideology against western influence in society (Arebi, 1994). They were isolated from society and sharply criticised it, talking about the end of times. Led by Juhayman Al-Otaibi, they announced the coming of the Mahdi, held 55,000 worshippers hostage, and took over of the mosque which led to hundreds of deaths, both civilian and military. Conceding to the ideological demands of the Islamist extremists forced the kingdom to adopt a much more conservative stance. According to Delong-Bas (2013), the state was forced to concede power back to the religious establishment after the siege. This had the dual effect of appeasing religious conservatives and justifying the increase in surveillance to monitor and
contain potential terrorist activity. The concession to the religious establishment was seen most visibly through public demonstrations of piety and religiosity, including attention to public adherence to prayer rituals, more literal and rigid interpretations of Islamic law, and, especially, concentrated attention to women as culture bearers, resulting in restrictions on their access to public space, requiring them to fully veil in public, and the exertion of greater state and patriarchal control over them at the expense of their ability to engage in personal decision making. (Delong-Bas, 2013, pg. 416).

Delong-Bas notes that these reforms were in contrast to the prior approach taken by King Faisal, who emphasized the expansion of public space and visibility for women through increasing their access to public education, media, and employment. Women, it seems, were used as a bargaining chip, and the increased discrimination they faced was the price paid to the religious conservatives to prevent further terrorist activity. Gender inequality became embedded within society and education through curricula for both male and female students and it was attributed to Islam. Hamdan (2005) writes that after the siege

women’s issues became the focus in any discussion about progress. A woman’s right to participate fully in the development of the nation was forbidden. In addition, after that television stations were prohibited from broadcasting images of unveiled women. Women were also banned from conducting their own businesses without a male representative, preferably a family member. (pg. 47)

This continued to affect women for years to come. Measures allegedly for the protection of women were put in place. For example,

Girls’ schools are surrounded by high walls and backup screens behind the entry area doors. Each girls’ school, college or university is assigned at least two men who are usually in their 50s or 60s who are responsible to check the identity of those who enter the school, deliver and pick up the mail and generally to safeguard the girls inside the school until they are picked up by their fathers or brothers. To date Physical Education and fitness facilities are not available for women. School buses for women have not escaped the rigid rules. Since women are not allowed to drive, the buses are driven by elderly men. Girls enter the bus from the back door and are usually supervised by a female relative of the driver. (Hamdan, 2005, pg. 50) 24

---

24 It must be noted that this has changed now as physical activities are allowed in schools.
During the 1990s, the ‘ṣaḥwa’ or Islamic Awakening swept through society. It was born out of the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia during the 1950s and 1960s who escaped repression in their home states. They became prominent in the education sector and university campuses, and through extracurricular activities and summer camps, to the point that it was an Egyptian Brother, Manna’ Al-Qattan, who formulated the educational policy in the kingdom in 1970. The vision in that policy directed that generation towards their ideology and later they led revolutions against the kingdom and were fighters in Soviet-Afghan War. This position of influence was formulated outside the official religious establishment and was directed to the youth in the form of ‘Islamic modernization’ (Lacroix, 2011, pg. 43). It spread through mosques and proliferated through religious media via cassettes and brochures. This ideology prohibited arts, music, and theatres at schools. ṣaḥwa was also followed by intellectual women in the 1980s. They studied abroad and used Islamic discourse to defend women’s rights and create their own religious centres. This new ‘religious discourse by women for women [became] more mediatized" through publishing magazines such as Fatayāt (Young Women) and Majallat Al-ʿusra (The Family Magazine), holding preaching ceremonies, and autonomous administration (Le Renard, 2014, pg. 40)

Yet women did not simply acquiesce to the newly imposed restrictions on their mobility and independence. Opposition among women towards marginalisation coalesced around the right to drive. Behind this restriction is a ‘whole political and social history’ and often framed within fighting American imperialism and westernisation (Le Renard, 2014, pg. viii). In 1990 during the Gulf War II, a group of 47 Saudi women mobilised a demonstration where they publicly defied the driving ban. This act led to the institutionalization of the ban (Le Renard, 2014, pg. viii). It was a turning point for women taking action against accumulated restrictions. However, the participants were subsequently arrested and had their passports confiscated. According to Duomato (1991),

25 Among the prominent names are Nora As-sad, Fatema Naseef, and Suhayla Zain Al-ʿAbdeen. It is also argued that the war played a role because Saudi women saw the American female troops driving their cars freely as well as Kuawiti women. However, as mentioned earlier demands for driving and other rights for women were discussed in newspapers by Saudi female and male writers at least as early as 1978.
within days of the demonstration, “the Ministry of Interior made official the ban on women's driving, banned all future political activity by women and, along with the religious leadership (the ‘ulamā’), called for deterrent punishment” (pg. 34).

After 9/11 and with the start of terrorist attacks within Saudi Arabia in 2003, the kingdom started a new reformist discourse marked by an emphasis on women’s participation in development and articulated within the ‘moderation of religion’ to fight religious extremism and terrorism (Le Renard, 2014). Education reform also began because of pressure from the international community to impose liberal reforms on education, especially in the religious schools, seen as ‘breeding grounds’ for future terrorists, which is an argument that is highly debated nowadays. Also in 2003, Saudi intellectuals and professionals signed the first petition calling for political reform. An initiative for ‘national dialogue’ was initiated and continued yearly and in 2004 especially it discussed women’s issues. In 2005, Saudi Arabia officially joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), signaling the Saudi state’s elaborate juggling act, balancing economic, religious, global, and domestic interests.

This juggling act became more difficult to maintain once the Arab Spring uprisings broke out in 2011. That spring, women activists launched two highly visible campaigns around suffrage and the right to drive, though both movements insisted that these were not demonstrations against the political system but simply requests for more rights for women. University protests broke out during this period as well, led by women students. The Women’s Right to Drive campaign has continued since the demonstration in June 2011. In 2012, a decree was issued that women only are permitted to work in lingerie shops in spite of some ‘ulamā’ s objections. King Salman lifted the ban on women driving by royal decree in 2017, promising its implementation by June 2018.

**Contemporary Economic Reforms**

The kingdom has taken severe austerity measures in recent years. Despite its petroleum-fueled wealth, Saudi Arabia has gone through periods of economic downturn and recession over the decades. The Saudi Vision 2030, an economic reform plan that prepares the nation for a post-oil
future, aims to diversify the Saudi economy and build new industries based inside the kingdom in ways that will allow its prosperity to continue once the oil fields run dry. The Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the driving force behind the plan, has encouraged the increased presence of women in the workforce, emphasising the need for the ‘economic citizenship’ and participation of women (Doaiji, 2017). Expanding the number of women in the workforce will likely be important for the Saudi Vision 2030 to succeed. To prepare for that vision, the Crown Prince also proposed a 2020 social transformation program which marked a strategy in which economic reform is preceded by sociocultural reform as manifested by the number of changes happening in a very short time. In 2017 alone, women won the right to practice sports at school and the opening of female sports clubs, the right to attend stadiums to watch football matches, as well as the lifting of the driving ban and reopening of cinemas.

**Women’s Educational Reforms**

The geopolitics of Saudi women’s rights, with both external and internal pressures to make women-centered reforms (Shannon, 2014) have led to reforms across political, social, and economic spheres, with attention paid to improving women’s status in the public arena (Kurdi, 2014). One such arena is education. School attendance by girls has dramatically increased over the years (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013; Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). Universities and colleges for women have continued to be built since the 1970s. Princess Nora bint ‘Abdu-Rahman University (PNU), since moving to its new campus in 2011, now accommodates 40,000 students and 11,000 staff and is not affiliated with any male campus like other women’s universities in Saudi Arabia. More importantly, the university has a number of research centres; one of them is dedicated to women’s studies research (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). Women are now permitted to study Islamic law at the university level. Significantly, the number of Saudi women receiving government scholarships to study abroad has grown rapidly in recent years. In 2011, close to 25,000 Saudi women students were financially supported by the government to study abroad, representing 20 percent of all Saudi higher education.
scholarship recipients (Bukhari & Denman, 2013, p. 157). This means that they will be the driving force for change when they finish their studies and come back home.

Furthermore, today, all universities are open to women including King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) in Dharan, which was a male-only university until June 2018. The custom of gender segregation is maintained at universities through separate campuses for men and women and closed-circuit television in cases where women take classes taught by male professors. The first co-educational institution allowing gender mixing opened under King ‘Abd-Allah in 2009, called King ‘Abd-Allah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), and was seen as King ‘Abd-Allah’s commitment to making the kingdom a centre for advanced scientific research (Commins, 2015). Similarly, experiments are underway to introduce co-educational learning in classrooms at kindergarten and junior school levels.

Every new decree, especially the ones related to women, ends with the phrase ‘according to Shari’a percepts’ (Le Renard, 2014). Calls for reforms to women’s education are ongoing (Alsuwaida, 2016; Bawazeer, 2015; Hamdan, 2006). Hamdan (2006) found that Arab women’s education contributes to the cultural and religious reproduction of gender socialization and to the formation of gender perceptions among Arab women that impact their educational pursuits. Bawazeer (2015) reports that conflicting discourses are emerging over the positions of women as student learners with advocates pushing for educational reforms to meet the challenges facing Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century.

**The Role of Women in Saudi Society: Diversity and Change**

Beyond education, both state reforms and cultural customs regarding the conduct and place of women in Saudi society has changed over time, increasing women’s participation in society. In 2009, King ‘Abd-Allah appointed Norah Al-Faiz to serve as the deputy minister of education, making her the first woman to hold a ministerial rank in Saudi Arabia. In her role, she is in charge of women’s affairs, making her the first woman to direct girls’ education. As mentioned earlier, the ban on women driving was officially lifted in June 2018. Debate surrounding the role and practices
of the Hay’a, the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Combating Vice, led to the decision in 2016 by Saudi authorities to reign in the powers of the Hay’a so that ‘it can nag but no longer police’ (Brown, 2017). This follows the newspaper column written by the Director of the Hay’a in Makkah declaring that gender segregation is a matter of social custom, not a religious requirement (Commins, 2015, pg. 122). According to Commins, the official prohibition is no longer effective because men and women interact in private online via webcams and social media platforms.

Given that many of the restrictions imposed on women are not technically laws but rather cultural customs, mores, and norms, it is not surprising that they demonstrate flexibility, manifesting in distinct ways throughout the substrata of Saudi society. One of the prominent researchers in this area is the Saudi anthropologist Soraya Altorki, who has conducted research on women’s development and employment in Saudi Arabia (1992), on the ideology and behavior of Saudi women belonging to elite families in the city of Jeddah (1986) and on family organization and women's power in Saudi urban society (1977). Arebi (1994) has also contributed to the understanding of Saudi women through her study on Saudi women writers and political discourse.

In particular, scholars such as these have noted a tremendous degree of gendered economic and class privilege which translates to different freedoms for women depending on class (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doaiji, 2017). According to Al-Rasheed, class location, more than particular ideologies, shapes the degree of gender-based restriction and discrimination women experience: ‘wealthy Westernised elite women enjoy far more freedoms than young marginalised divorcees and mothers’ (2013, pg. 37). She argues that this privilege explains why many Saudi women find themselves investing in maintaining the rigid system of control. What she means is that having these class privileges may hinder their identification with other women, who lack these privileges.

Al-Rasheed builds on the groundbreaking work of Altorki (1977), an ethnographer who uncovered the ways in which urban elite women, through their influence over the institution of marriage by creating new links within and between families, exercise power and influence decisions that affects the basic organisational structure of their society. As Altorki explains, ‘marriage is a
network of power in such a society since the basis of economic, social, political and psychological position is the family, and marriage links families” (1977, pg. 277). Altorki shows how these women manipulate marriage negotiations in part by ‘suggesting as desirable those women who will satisfactorily accede to the interests of women belonging to the family of the potential bridegroom’ (1977, pg. 277). This example shows how these women turn a restriction into an opportunity to gain power within the establishment of marriage, itself a centre of power.

The gendered economic and class privilege that characterizes Saudi society can also be seen in the transgressive acts in terms of dress and public conduct of young urban Saudi women (Le Renard, 2013). According to Le Renard, these transgressive acts have the effect of producing these women as a group; the acts precede the group formation. In this case, the class privilege of the women who commit these transgressive acts is embedded in the act itself; in this way, their class status makes it possible for them to ‘get away with’ such transgressions. Such acts include consumerist selfpresentations that have become norms among urban young women ‘who conform to prevent rejection from the group’ (2013, pg. 108). In this observation, Le Renard cautions against reading transgressive practices as necessarily having a resistance-based motive, even if they do have actual impacts. Such acts are not always about resistance; rather, they are ‘embedded in shifting power relations in the context of reform’ (2013, pg. 108). Based on the previous studies, it becomes clear that Saudi women have not been silent and submissive as often portrayed in media, but instead negotiate power through different means such as managing the arrangement of family and transgressive acts. In the next section, I will survey the history of feminist activism in Saudi Arabia within an Islamic framework.

**ISLAMIC FEMINISMS IN SAUDI ARABIA**

**The Politics of Authenticity: Diversity and Division within Saudi Feminisms**

Given the diversity among Saudi women which give rise to diverse interests along the lines of class, ethnicity, religious identity, and other personal identities, it is only possible to speak of Saudi feminisms rather than a singular form of feminism practiced within the kingdom. If there is a
defining feature of the body of feminisms practiced in Saudi Arabia it would be its diversity and division. Al-Dabbagh (2015) categorizes independent Saudi women’s groups into four political orientations: liberal (librāliyya), rights-based (ḥuqūqiyya), Islamist feminist (nasawīyya Islāmiyya), and conservative (muḥāfīza). Within these political orientations, there are additional features that distinguish Saudi feminists. They include political dissidents, youth (Al-Rasheed, 2011; Doaiji, 2017; Le Renard, 2013) Islamists, Qur’anic interpreters (Almahasheer, 2018), religious conservatives, nonpractitioners, writers (Al Fassi, 2016; Al-Ghadeer, 2009; Al-Rasheed, 2011; Algahtani, 2016; Arebi, 1994) and artists. Their identity politics are also refracted through their political orientations, such as Arab Muslim identities, tribal cultures, gender identities, and class identities (Al Fassi, 2016).

However, all of them are identified as Muslims.

According to Kurdi (2014), Saudi women generally refuse to be associated with the term feminism. However, the term has been embraced more by women students who have been exposed to feminist ideas through studying abroad. Despite rejecting the label, Alyedreessy, Helsdingen, and Al-Sobaihi (2017) contend that an ‘emerging feminist consciousness’ is taking place among Saudi women, a shift that has ‘heightened their questioning regarding their status in the family and society’ (pg. 112). Importantly, this shift occurred at a moment when Saudi religious politics are engaging with modernism in new ways in what Al-Rasheed (2015) calls the ‘new divine politics’, defined both by a rigorous reinterpretation of foundational Islamic texts and civil society activism. In this climate, the boundaries between secular and religious politics become blurred. Some of the current women’s feminist activism is carried out through the framework of new divine politics and as such, provides one example of blurring the secular and religious that is taking place within Saudi feminism more broadly.

For Al-Rasheed (2013), the location of women and their activism within the new divine politics is merely one manifestation of women as ‘politics projects’ in a long trajectory that stretches back to the end of the nineteenth century. Their emancipation, argues Al-Rasheed, has
been ‘delayed and thwarted’ as women have ‘become hostage’ to contradictory state agendas that both demand female piety and encourage modernity. Yet, even as women are being used by different groups to further their interests, women themselves are constructing their own political projects and social change agendas from a range of perspectives (Al-Dabbagh, 2015).

The “I Am my Own Guardian” campaign provides one recent example of the array of political positions that exist among women activists, especially as the campaign grew. As a result of this expansion, Doaiji (2017) explains, ‘new faces gained visibility and were able to develop into the campaign’s prominent and leading activists. The emergence of new narratives and perspectives led to tensions over the leadership and central identity or “face” of the campaign’ (pg. 1).

One of these new perspectives represented in this campaign and across Saudi women’s activism is Islamic feminism, which Faulkner-Jones (2016) contends provides methodologies for improving the lives of Muslim women and ‘a lens through which to view the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia and other MENA countries to gain a clearer picture of the trials and potential entrance points for empowerment’ (pg. 168). Kurdi (2014) sees Islamic feminism in the ways in which Saudi Arabian women interpret feminism within the boundaries of their specific culture and Islamic standpoint.

Thus, the story of contemporary Saudi feminisms is one of religion, nationalism, authenticity, and digital media as a new communication tool. Yet, can we say that a Saudi Islamic feminism exists apart from what could be called Saudi feminism? Is the feminist activism within Saudi Arabia and by Saudi women distinctly Islamic? Can we possibly understand Saudi feminism outside of Islam? In other words, is Saudi feminism necessarily Islamic because of the Saudi context which itself is deeply embedded in Islam and Islamic law? I turn to a more detailed discussion of several women-led rights campaigns in Saudi Arabia that have taken place over the years in the hopes of offering clarity regarding the roles of Islam and ‘Saudi authenticity’ in their feminisms. But first, I situate these campaigns in the broader realm of social media and politics.

26 As mentioned previously in how the girls’ schools operated in the 1980s and 1990s.
Social Media and Politics

Social media have gained wide popularity in Saudi Arabia in recent years. This has led scholars to explore how these online platforms are impacting both its culture and its people. Saudi Arabia has the highest number of YouTube users worldwide per capita (BBC, 2015). This is reinforced by swift access to the internet and increased ownership of smartphones. The internet is now used for economic reasons and to provide e-government services. It has become a repeated slogan that ‘Twitter is the parliament of the Saudi people’ by Saudi Twitter users, and that it has become a tool to Saudi people and youth to voice their social or political demands for or against the authorities or people in power, which are sometimes granted when the demands become trends. It changed the youth mentality, which was previously controlled by the agenda of either the official media or extremist religious discourse. In this section, I explore the various online and offline forums for connection, self-expression, and activism available to Saudi women activists as well as media portrayals of their activism within and beyond the Kingdom.

Women and Social Media

Saudi women are both producers and subjects of social media. It plays an important role in exposing women’s issues to the public and forming public opinion. Social media usage has been found to be relatively high among women (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004) who have been drawn to it for various reasons but principally for connection (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004; ‘Arab Social Media Report’, 2011; Luppicini & Saleh, 2017; Alyedressy et al., 2017), self-expression (Guta & Karolak, 2015; Gwynne, 2013; Khannous, 2011; Al Maghlouth, 2017), and activism (Altuwayjiri, 2017; Doaiji, 2017; Khannous, 2011).

This body of research reflects previous findings that education and work outside the home provide new roles and experiences for Saudi women outside marriage and motherhood which, in turn, have a ‘positive effect on their behaviour, self-esteem, aspirations and relations with others’ (Almunajjed, 1997, pg. 6). The discussions around the role of social media in women’s lives show...
that the social media are an important institution, alongside education and work, opening up new spaces for Saudi women to connect, express, and act.

**Connection.** Social media promotes connection and civic participation. The ‘Arab Social Media Report’ (2011) concluded that social media technologies represent an important tool for the economic and political empowerment of Arab women, including Saudis, because of the ways in which they increase women’s opportunities for civic participation. Al-Saggaf and Williamson (2004) explored such civic participation in online communities among Saudis to gain insights into the online community experience in Saudi Arabia and how such communities affect participants’ offline culture. Luppicini and Saleh (2017) found that online social networks provide critical resources for divorced Saudi women who face social, psychological, economic, and legal challenges as a result of their marital status. According to the authors, these networks help divorced women avoid becoming social outcasts, manage relationships with their former husbands, obtain income assistance, build confidence, manage depression, and otherwise offer emotional support. Alyedreessy et al. (2017) explore how Saudi women’s increased opportunities for interaction with many people outside their direct family circle relate to their feelings of self-esteem by studying the relationship between self-esteem and social media usage among women. The authors argue that, while technologies facilitate such civic participation, desire to participate must also be present for participation to become actualized, which is directly influenced by self-esteem. As they put it, ‘to have their voices heard, the women themselves need to feel that they are worth listening to’ (2017, pg. 111).

**Self-expression.** Indeed, the ability to have one’s voice heard is what draws many Saudi women to social media. Cyberspace offers unique platforms of self-expression because the nature of such expression is, in a way, disembodied (Gwynne, 2013; Guta & Karolak, 2015; Khannous, 2011). This disembodiment is precisely the characteristic of social media users wherein lies the freedom for Saudi women to express themselves as they wish. The disembodiment is produced by the anonymity that is possible in cyberspace. Thanks to the internet’s protection of individual
privacy, writing blogs, commenting on others’ public posts, sending messages, and more are possible anonymous actions taken by users; the anonymity disconnects the action from its author’s body. It has its downfalls as it may increase fake identities and cyberbullying.

Given the overdetermination of the woman’s body in Saudi society, Saudi women may be finding through social media and the internet in general that freedom lies in detachment from the body (Guta & Karolak, 2015). Guta and Karolak (2015) suggest that the Internet ‘creates a safe space where the female body, predominant in daily life, is nonexistent and only thoughts count’ (2015, pg. 115). Gwynne (2013), in her exploration of the relationship between agency and ‘cyberspatial disembodiment’, argues for the gender liberation possibilities of virtual spaces. Similarly, Khannous (2011) develops the concept of ‘virtual gender’ in her study of Moroccan and Saudi women’s cyberspace.

These authors and others find that blogging, the quintessential form of self-expression in the internet age, is abundant among Saudi women. Within the broad umbrella of blogging, it becomes easy for the belief that ‘the personal is political’ and its corresponding practices to take hold among women users who have new audiences to hear their personal stories (Al Maghlouth, 2017; Guta & Karolak, 2015). This ‘political blogging’, with its privacy protections and lack of gatekeepers, provides the medium to ‘negotiate the boundaries imposed on them by law or norms which result in new forms of self-expression and identification among Saudi women (Guta & Karolak, 2015). It both enables and facilitates particular forms of expression and a dialogic relationship with readers worldwide. For example, it allowed Saudi women to negotiate and represent what they see as misconceptions about Saudi contexts and women’s rights as is shown by Eman Al-Nafjan’s (A Saudiwoman’s Weblog) blogging on Wahhabism, the veil, and her prominent Saudi series. She mentions clearly that she started blogging because of the misconceptions she read in international media about Saudi women. Similar themes are discussed on Maha Noor Elahi’s blog A Saudi Woman’s Voice. I will revisit their writing in Chapter 4.
**Activism.** Given the use of self-expression for political purposes by Saudi women on social media, it is clear that the three driving forces behind Saudi women’s high social media usage highlighted here—connection, self-expression, and activism—are inextricably bound. Thus, for my analytical purposes, I see them as distinct yet interlocking realms, which can acknowledge that, for some Saudi women, social media usage is strictly personal and they have no political intentions with their texts and interactions with others online even while social media is, for others, a jumping board into politics, movements for social change, and even new careers as political critics. For this latter group, online activist forums have been central to their work and credited to their successes. As Al-Dabbagh (2015) explains, ‘The general landscape for independent activism is extremely restricted and regulated. Most activism works unofficially or virtually using digital media and forums’ (pg. 235).

**New social media activism: Politicising the public sphere.** Online activism creates a ‘feminized public sphere’, writes Al-Tuwayjiri (2017), which allows women to communicate with each other and fight for their political rights. This sphere operates in the context of and negotiation with internal and external media portrayals of Saudi women’s activism, such as Saudi media depictions of Manal al-Sharif’s 2011 campaign as ‘Western influenced’ or their branding of the 2016 ‘I am My Own Guardian’ campaign as unpatriotic (Doaiji, 2017). Saudi women are also aware of how their mobilisations and their representations in Western media could be used to serve agendas that they do not support against their religion or homeland. The above and other Saudi feminist campaigns that emerged during and after the Arab Spring uprisings illustrate the diversity that characterises Saudi feminist activism, in terms of the characteristics of actors and their types of activism, the vast majority of which is online. The medium of activism used by Saudi women impacts how they contend with other media discursive portrayals of their work and messages, which carry different risks and produce distinct outcomes. These choices of media among activists and how they engage the world of media and politics—how they deploy their agency and respond to
constraint—can be seen as leading to various ‘factions’ of activist groups among Saudi women feminists.

Political dissidents are one such group. Their bold outspokenness and political rhetoric make them easy targets of the authorities; thus, some are imprisoned or end up in exile. It is only those in exile who are able to continue to make their voices heard. Yet, their positioning outside Saudi Arabia leaves them vulnerable to accusations of ‘Western influence’ on their thinking and political agendas. Anyone living outside of the kingdom risks quick dismissal as lacking Saudi authenticity. Western influenced activism is ‘discredited as betraying the nation and causing national instability’ (Al-Rasheed, 2010, pg. 101). Moreover, society would also discredit it as an attack on Islam. It is an ambivalent situation as it does not fit with the huge numbers of female students sent to study abroad and are sponsored by the government. Thus, Saudi women’s activism is subjected to and implicated in geopolitical ideological conflicts between ‘the West’ and the ‘Islamists’. This is why many Saudis from the younger generation, who are also embracing their religious identity, think that the best way forward is to avoid being trapped in these conflicts, preferring instead to work within the system and taking into consideration the many reforms that the kingdom has undertaken in the context of challenges brought about by instability in the broader Middle East.

The landscape of online activist platforms: Blogging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and others. Arab Muslim feminists have deployed Facebook, Twitter, and blogging in recent years as tools for networking with other feminists and forming a range of groups (Altuwayjiri, 2017; Khannous, 2011). Khannous found that Moroccan and Saudi women have, through conversing online about issues around gender and Islam in the context of globalization, constructed their own political cyberspace. Through Facebook and blogging, Saudi women speak to one another freely about a range of issues including personal legal status, discourses on feminism and Islam, redefining gender roles, and sexuality. These discussions, explains Khannous, encourage women to form groups which can then be used as platforms to coalesce around key women’s issues, use new forms of feminist discourse, and initiate change from within the kingdom. Furthermore, according to
Khannous, their online social networking is revolutionizing the way Saudi women approach Islam. They find themselves simultaneously debating, discussing, and explaining their religion to people unfamiliar with Islam on Facebook and in blog posts, exploring and articulating their Muslim identities, and learning about the rights of women elsewhere. Similarly, Altuwayjiri (2017) found that ‘political tweeting’ had a positive impact on the political awareness among Saudi women.

Beyond providing the digital space for awareness, education, and building networks, online activist platforms have also been heavily used by women activists to organize mobilizations, demonstrations, vigils, and other forms of ‘offline’, in-person activism (Al-Sharif, 2013, 2017; Doaiji, 2017). I now turn to these Saudi feminist activities during and after the Arab Spring uprisings in order to examine them in greater detail and situate them historically in relation to politics, Islam, and the broader feminist movement inside and outside the Kingdom at the time.

**Suffrage campaign:** *Mubādarat Baladī (2011).* The women’s suffrage campaign, referred to as *mubādarat baladī,* was the first of several women-led demonstrations and protests during the Arab Spring that highlighted women’s rights to vote and drive (Al-Fassi, 2014). A group of women successfully mobilised a voter registration demonstration, recruiting largely through Facebook (Doaiji, 2017). The demonstration was held at a voter registration station in April 2011 to show the world that women are not allowed to register to vote. The demonstration was designed to speed up the implementation of this reform which was promised years ago but not implemented, and was deemed a success (Doaiji, 2017). King ‘Abd-Allah, who was viewed as pro-women’s rights and empowerment, announced shortly thereafter that women would be allowed to participate in the 2015 municipal elections and be eligible as Consultative Assembly members. They had been campaigning since 2004 (Al-Fassi, 2015). In an interview with to Al-Fassi (2015), a leading figure in this movement, ‘we are concentrating on the fact that as many women as possible should enter and register in these three weeks to spread the word about what can happen if women get more power. Then we can change things for ourselves’ (Róisin, 2015). Thus, the main focus was to raise consciousness and increase women’s access to power.
Right to Drive campaign (1990) (Women to Drive Movement, 2011). The 2011 right to drive campaign (Al-Sharif, 2013, 2017a), when viewed historically, can be understood as a ‘revival’ or continuation of the first right to drive campaign which took place 20 years earlier. Doumato (1991) describes the 1990 women’s demonstration against the ban and its aftermath this way:

On November 6, 1990, some 50 women met in a supermarket parking lot in Riyadh. The women dismissed their drivers and drove their cars in tandem through the streets of Riyadh, defying publicly an unofficial but strictly observed ban on women’s driving. In Saudi Arabia, where women may not travel without permission from their nearest male relative, work where men are present or even enter most government ministries, and where political gatherings for everyone, men and women, are illegal, the driving demonstration was viewed as revolutionary (Doumato, 1991, pg. 34).

Al-Sharif launched her 2011 campaign as part of the Arab Spring uprisings and used the same digital tools as used by participants of the uprisings across the Arab world. Ignored by local media early on, no one closely followed Al-Sharif’s Right to Drive campaign inside the kingdom. This compelled Al-Sharif to seek out online resources to get exposure, generate awareness of her campaign, and encourage participation. This search led her to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Western media outlets. Al-Sharif embraced opportunities to do interviews with CNN and other news outlets. When she was taken by security forces and imprisoned after she and a friend filmed her driving her car in Riyadh and posted it to YouTube, her friends launched a Twitter campaign calling for her release (Al-Sharif, 2017). Similarly, after Shaima Jastania was sentenced to 10 lashes for driving in Jeddah, a Twitter campaign on her behalf led King ‘Abd-Allah to overturn her sentence. Change was brought through the exposure of their plights to the public through social media.

The Right to Drive campaign highlights the practical constraints and barriers that the rigid gender system places on women, impeding their lives in multiple ways. Since they cannot drive, they must hire a driver or hail a taxi. Personal drivers incur a huge expense, one that not all Saudi women can afford. Successfully hailing a taxi during rush hour in a city like Riyadh is near impossible, as each one that passes filled with other women who are not allowed to drive.
Importantly, the ban on women driving is simply that: a ban. It is not a law, placing it more in an area of informal social control than a law. Disobeying the ban does not result in a woman’s arrest for driving but for other violations, such as causing national instability, as happened with Manal Al-Sharif after her YouTube video went viral and later to women activists. Framing this as a national threat turns the support and sympathy of the people against them. Thus, the ban is not a law but operates as a law: if you drive, you will be apprehended, jailed, and otherwise punished. (However, it should be also noted that Al-Sharif’s campaign was successful because many women went driving before, after, and on the day her drive happened, 26 October 2013). Many of the other restrictions on Saudi women and rules imposed on them are mandated by social norms and customs. When social pressure is strong, the state does not need to impose a law. Something can be socially forbidden without being illegal. The consequences of people’s actions may be similar.

Al-Sharif’s use of online social media platforms for her activism was critical to the success of her campaign. Thus, women’s organizing within Saudi Arabia during this period became connected to, supported, and endorsed by regional and global movements in new ways. Online activism had become a tool of Saudi women activists well before 2011. The Arab Spring simply provided a much larger audience for their online campaigns, allowing them to go global. Saudi women and the driving issue have long been a subject of Western focus as manifested by headlines in leading Western newspapers about what Saudi women ‘still can’t do’. Saudi women are well aware of being under spotlight and have mixed feelings and re/actions towards it.

The lifting of the driving ban, by King Salman’s royal decree, is considered by many as ‘feminist victory’ and a major concession to women activists. In particular, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is seen as principal force behind the lifting of the ban. He has pushed for a series of reforms including lifting the driving ban. His Vision 2030, a reform plan for a post-oil era, seeks to elevate women to nearly one-third of the workforce, up from about 22 percent now. The decision to allow women to drive could give them the mobility required to join the workforce.
“I am My Own Guardian” Campaign (2016). Despite the advances symbolized by lifting the ban on women driving and the significant material effects that will become visible after women drivers become widespread, many Saudi women activists insist that any social change will be merely cosmetic without dismantling the kingdom's rigid guardianship system (Doaiji, 2017). Saudi women now no longer need male permission to start a business, but the guardianship system remains intact. This sentiment among women activists, one outcome of the Right to Drive campaign, led to the rise of the “I am My Own Guardian” campaign in 2016. Using social media tools, the campaign was ‘unprecedented in its ability to influence and mobilize varied and ever-growing groups of constituents, including a new generation of young women who were not previously politically active’ (Doaiji, 2017). Social media enabled them to expand their networks, strengthen their organisation, and disseminate their messages. The campaign demanded legal representation from the state (in the form of full citizenship), social recognition and economic empowerment.

Their efforts resulted in what is considered a monumental achievement: a governmental order issued on April 17, 2017 ending the requirement for a male guardian’s approval for women to access government services. In most circumstances, this should ‘allow women to study, access health care, and work in the public sector without a male guardian’s consent’ (Doaiji, 2017, pg. 7). Perhaps even more significant than the governmental order is the effect the campaign has had on Saudi society by bringing before the Saudi public ‘questions and concerns of social recognition, resource redistribution, and political participation’ (Doaiji, 2017, pg. 18). Furthermore, by building the online infrastructure for continued activism in the form of strong feminist activist networks, debates and mobilisation efforts go on. Reflecting on the campaign, Doaiji (2017) asserts that the dynamics and development of this campaign, which depended heavily on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, are ‘a testimony to the new energy in women’s activism in the kingdom’ and provide a ‘fascinating snapshot of state-society relations at this time of generational transition’. The women
are sending their demand directly to the King through Twitter which also initiated reinterpretations of the Islamic texts to support their claim that such a policy is not mandated by Islam.

**MANAL AL-SHARIF: DEFINING FEMININITY AND WOMANHOOD IN CYBER-SPACE**

Manal Al-Sharif’s identities as a woman, as Saudi, as Muslim are all distinctive, carrying distinctive meanings. What does it mean to be Saudi? What does it mean to be a Saudi woman? What does it mean to be a Saudi Muslim woman? What value do all of these questions hold for civic and personal identity? If we adopt the premise that identities are not stable, are relative to the surrounding environment, are idiosyncrasies of individuals, and change over time, then her religious, gender, and national identities most certainly changed over time as she makes clear in her memoir. One of the objectives of this chapter is to see how those different identities intersect, interact and influence one another in one particular case.

My primary source is *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman’s Awakening*, Al-Sharif’s 2017 memoir. I also rely on other sources, including speeches she gave as a result of her activism, such as in Oslo in 2012, as well as subsequent talks and interviews she gave to news media such as CNN. I also include Al-Sharif’s blog posts and other online writing. These online texts include postings on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

Many of Al-Sharif’s online writings constitute cyber-writings, an emergent online literary form in the autobiographical genre (Anishchenkova, 2014). Cyber-writings are a type of online autobiographical writing that has emerged as a product of technology associated with the internet age; i.e. digital autobiographies. Cyber-writings such as those produced by Al-Sharif have become particularly important to Saudi women’s activism. Engaging the feminist ethos that ‘the personal is political’, many cyber-writings, as online autobiographical texts, have fed online activism. Individuals such as Al-Sharif learned that in telling their personal stories, they could galvanize political support for their causes. As discussed earlier, independent spaces have emerged with the advent of the internet, allowing women to explore, through cyber-writings, new ways of relating Islam and feminism, Muslim identity and gender identity, and different forms of oppression. Such
independent spaces to express personal views have arguably led to intersectional thinking among many Islamic feminists, including Al-Sharif.

My method of analysis involves intersectional autobiographical criticism. I follow Anishchenkova (2014, pg. 2) by including both conventionally and unconventionally published works, such as cyber forms of self-representation and by treating the autobiographical narrative as cultural text, going beyond treating it only as a literary text. Al-Sharif’s various cyber-writings represent one author’s contributions to digital media, including blogging and social media. Anishchenkova considers Internet blogs to be one of the newest and most versatile autobiographical genres. As it has grown in popularity, cyber-writing ‘represents perhaps the most dynamic mode of autobiographical construction’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 11). She explains the significance of the rise of blogging for the autobiographical genre this way:

Blogging culture has fundamentally altered the very nature of autobiographical narration by putting authors in direct communication with their readers, often in real time. No longer a retrospective prose, autobiographical cyber-writing devoid of censorship restrictions in most parts of the Arab world has truly become the voice of Arab youth. Therefore, such autobiographical blogs offer a fascinating insight into discourses of cultural identity among younger generations. (2014, pg. 11-12)

Anishchenkova sees cyber-writings as a new space for autobiographical expression, a ‘fascinating site of autobiographical production’ given its ‘heterogeneous and unstable nature’ (2014, pg. 29). The internet upended the traditional relationship between author and audience ‘by putting them in direct communication, often in real time’ (Anishchenkova, 2014, pg. 30). It is difficult to understate just how transformative this new technology has been for communication. In such an environment, writing took on a new attribute: immediacy. As Anishchenkova describes, ‘texts are created, released, and circulated, and then receive the reader’s response so quickly that this process has completely reconfigured discursive practices’ (2014, pg. 31). She sees blogging in particular as a ‘unique and previously impossible modality of identity making’ given ‘the formation of plural immediate fixations of autobiographical subjectivity (blog entries), combined with the reader’s direct involvement in the autobiographical act’ (2014, pg. 32). One of the defining features
of cyberwriting—its anonymity—is particularly important in the Arab context, Anishchenkova argues, echoing earlier discussions in this chapter, because it avoids official censorship, as Al-Sharif faced, and ‘because it gives more freedom to be open without fear of being judged by society and family’ (2014, pg. 33). Internet use is considered a generational privilege.

Because cyber-writings are produced with the intention of being shared with an audience, they can thus be understood as part of the media landscape. Thus, I treat Al-Sharif’s cyber-writings and YouTube videos as a form of media to be read and interpreted. Given this, my analytical approach incorporates media into an intersectional analysis of religion, gender, education, ethnicity, and class in Al-Sharif’s ‘e-activism’.

**Forming an Islamic Feminist Standpoint: Belief, Consciousness, and Action**

In analysing and contextualising Al-Sharif’s writings, I argue that Manal Al-Sharif is a Saudi Islamic feminist such that her feminist beliefs and practices are distinctly Saudi, distinctly Islamic, and also distinctly hers. My intersectional analysis reveals the contextual nature of her Islamic feminism, produced as a Saudi woman vis-à-vis Saudi society. There are three principle dimensions to her Islamic feminism: context, belief, and action. Her Islamic feminism is shaped by the sociocultural and political context in which she grew up, became educated, and established herself as a working professional and a mother. Her Islamic feminism is also reflected in the set of beliefs that she developed over time regarding both Islam and women as well as in her expressions of agency and calculated activist actions.

**Belief.** Considering Al-Sharif’s core beliefs and ideologies is important for understanding her activism and how she represents an Islamic feminist because ideology drives action, as one can see time and again with Al-Sharif. In her formative years Al-Sharif considered herself a ‘moderately observant’ Muslim (2017, pg. 195). The corresponding belief system was reflected in her actions; in other words, belief drives action. When she became radicalized in her teenage years, starting at age thirteen, she melted music cassette tapes and burned an entire pile of papers, photos, and other items belonging to her parents and siblings that she deemed ḥarām, forbidden. To contextualise the
transformation in Al-Sharif’s religiosity and religious beliefs, it is important to note that during the period that Al-Sharif became radicalised, the same process was happening in her classrooms and across the country:

In the 1980s and 90s, as this form of Salafism gained traction in the Saudi kingdom, the overall state of the Muslim world played directly into the Salafi narrative of a war against Islam […] According to our teachers and clerics, no one was at greater risk in this global struggle than women. The anti-Islamist forces were determined to deflower women, to bring them out of their houses and remove their veils.

There was no counter narrative. By that time the extreme Salafis controlled all media; books that did not conform with their ideology were banned. The fixation on declaring things forbidden (haram), which had begun with girls’ education, now extended to censorship of the printed press, radio, and television. They also rejected anything new that might disrupt official communications, such as satellite channels and the Internet, and innovations like credit cards and insurance. No battle was too small. In their Friday sermons, imams denounced the infiltration of satellite dishes inside the kingdom, declaring a religious war on the dish. People who owned one were branded as traitors to the faith. (2017, pg. 199-200)

After she let go of her radicalism, where did she find herself with regards to her faith? She never specified. She never wrote of questioning her faith as a Muslim even as she was full of questions during her transition away from radicalism. In her memoir, she describes how her access to the internet while attending university in Jeddah challenged her Salafist beliefs:

I began reading articles and postings that criticized extremist Salafi ideology. I read opinions on the *niqab*, on singing, on drawing animate beings, and also on loyalty and disavowal. My whole life, I’d known only one perspective on these subjects, and as far as I’d been concerned, it was the right one. Now I felt increasingly troubled by everything I read. Gradually, I realized that the ideas I had embraced and defended blindly all my life represented a singular, and highly radical, point of view. I began to question everything. I began posting in forums, discussing these radical ideas and rejecting them. I started drawing again, and I stopped judging Sara for revealing her face. Nothing did more to change my ideas and convictions than the advent of the Internet and, later, social media. When social media began to flourish during the Arab Spring of 2011, I found myself in possession of a voice—a miraculous thing in a country where women are almost never heard. (2017, pg. 275)

She remained Muslim as far as we as the readers know. It seems that Islam plays into how Al-Sharif practices her feminism in multiple ways. Islam means many things to many different people; even broadly, it can be spoken of in terms of religious practice, religious belief, personal and group identity, nationalism, culture, and so on. Thus, it could be argued that Islam plays
different roles in her feminist activism. In a way, it shaped virtually all dimensions of her activism and was part of the reason she decided to engage in activism.

Her narrative critiques (and by extension her activism) also targets the dominance of one interpretation of religion as the only true interpretation and radicalism within teaching, practicing, and preaching religion. For example, she writes about school experience:

There was no room in the girls’ schools for any activity that was not directly related to our academic classes—they were forbidden by order of the mufti. No sports, no theater, no music, no art appreciation, no visits to museums or historical sites, no celebrations for our end-of-year graduation. There wasn’t even space for a school library... The only permitted enrichment classes were drawing, sewing, and home economics. We were taught how to make different types of stitches, how to crochet, and how to prepare cakes and pickles: even though we were at school, the expectation was that our ultimate destination was inside a home.

I adored drawing class, though we weren’t allowed to draw living creatures, only plants and inanimate objects; the Saudi clerics’ interpretation of Islamic law prohibits representative art, such as drawing a person. Many times I tried to test the limits of this prohibition. My smiling fruits often enjoyed the use of human hands and feet. But my teacher usually confiscated those drawings, which ended up as shreds of paper in the wastebasket. So I stopped drawing people in my art sketchbook and started instead to draw them in my notebooks at home, which I filled with the forbidden smiling faces and bounding animals. (2017, pg. 100)

Therefore, her narrative is the product of a lived reality of religiosity, piety, and feminist practice within an Islamic context. Yet, Al-Sharif makes no clear distinction between different Islamists and their ideologies within Saudi Arabia and she refers to them either interchangeably or as a monolithic identity not only in Saudi Arabia, but in the whole Muslim world as manifested in her reference to Salafism. For example, she rarely speaks of Wahhabism in her memoir, except when discussing Juhayman, who led the siege on the Grand Mosque in 1979, describing him as ‘steeped in this highly fundamentalist Wahhabi-Salafi preaching’ (2017, pg. 132). Among other references to radicalism, she discusses the ṣaḥwa and how she was ‘a project of a terrorist’ as a target of the ṣaḥwa discourse during her adolescence, calling herself one member from a ‘lost generation’ or brainwashed generation which received radical education in schools. This material was often not in the curriculum but still found its way into the classroom. For example, the teachers would bring extra material to class and distribute it among girls or a Sheikh would come and preach
to girls. In the following passage, she connects Juhayman’s ideology to Salafism (which is a heterogenous group) to the national schooling influenced by what are referred to as Wahhabi teachings (which see themselves as Sunni and not a new sect in Islam with its emphasis on *Tawhid* and following the Prophet’s deeds) on her schooling:

As a teenager, at least sixty percent of our time in class was spent studying religion and religious subjects—including *Tajweed*, the rules for reciting the words of the Qur’an; the *hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); the *Fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence; the importance of *Tawhid*, Muslim belief in the singular pre-eminence of God; and Islamic culture and history. But we were not studying a classical, historical understanding of Islam. We were studying a hybrid Salafi ideology, which decreed that Islam must be returned to its purest form, the form they believed was first practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his Companions (*Sahabah*). This was the doctrine that Juhayman and his followers preached when they captured the Grand Mosque, the doctrine that the Saudi royal family allowed to dominate much of the kingdom in the aftermath of the siege. This Salafism requires strict adherence to the most literal interpretation of the Qur’an, believes in no other law but *shariʿa*, and embraces the tenets of *jihad* against nonbelievers (Al-Sharif, 2017).

Though this is a problematic connection to make, for Al-Sharif the ideology of Juhayman was embraced by the government as a compromise so the incident would not be repeated again.

In one interview, Al-Sharif claims she is fighting what she calls Islamic Radicalism which, according to some, interrupted the process of modernity that had begun during King Fasial’s reign in the 1960-70s with the siege of the Grand Mosque in 1979. As Al-Sharif describes, at the time, ‘Saudi Arabia had been both increasingly prosperous and increasingly modern, supported by the global oil boom, which had lifted the country out of poverty and turned it into a land of plenty’ (2017, pg. 137). It was after the siege ended that more restrictions were applied to the social and cultural realm as manifested in three areas: education, media, and more restrictions on the rights of women. She describes the aftermath of the siege, still referred to in Makkah as ‘the days of Juhayman’, this way:

But afterward, fears of a radical Islamist tide began to pervade the country, prompting the ruling family to meet with senior religious clerics and elders to discuss how this new brand of extremism could be addressed. In an effort to appease those who had gravitated to this ideology, the Saudi state decided to embrace some of their doctrines. Juhayman and his followers might have been driven from the Grand Mosque, but now their extreme beliefs would increasingly occupy the entire Saudi nation from within.
The first group to feel the full impact were women. In the weeks after the uprising, female announcers were banned from television. Pictures of females were censored in newspapers, and the government cracked down on the employment of women. (2017, pg. 137-138)

The above quote manifests the multiple discriminations that women were subjected to, first by the radical Islamists, then the state and later by the society as this discrimination was normalized through education and other institutions. Women bear the brunt of this ideological hardening because they are always considered as bearers of cultural authenticity.

Al-Sharif’s Islamic beliefs changed over time. As they developed and transformed, they became intertwined with her beliefs about women in Saudi society. She came to occupy a stance in which she firmly asserted women’s right to the public sphere and gender equality, insisting that nowhere in the Qur’an does it say that women should be treated as less than men, or that discrimination against women is condoned. She believed that Islam was fundamentally a peaceful and compassionate religion; witnessing and experiencing first-hand physical and psychological violence, abuse, and discrimination, she knew that none of it had any place in Islam (2017). Al-Sharif does not question the intrinsic starting position: that of the practice of faith. She critiques the mediation and authority of that faith, rather than its primacy.

It could even be said that as her Islamic beliefs changed, the way in which her religious ideology (Islam) and gender ideology (feminism; gender equality; women’s rights; equal rights) came together to radicalise her feminist activism and form her Islamic feminist ideology. She describes her belief when she was a teenager as: ‘I believed in a highly fundamentalist version of Islam’ (2017, pg. 20) and ‘My views had remained extremist and closed-minded’. In her diary entries during the end of high school exams, she wrote:

I know I’ll be asked about my studies on the Day of Judgment: for whom was I studying? For whom did I stay up late all those nights, and for what purpose? And what will I say? God, forgive me for all the times I studied for myself and not for the good of Islam. Make all this studying for your benefit, and don’t let the devil get close to us. I’ve made a pledge to myself: I’ll do everything I can to become someone of significance, not for the sake of fame, but because I want to serve Muslims everywhere; I want to offer them something useful. I want to be like Necmettin Erbakan [1926–2011], the head of the Islamist Welfare Party in Turkey, or Ali Begovic [Alija Izetbegovic, 1925–2003], the president of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I want to visit all the countries of the Islamic world, solve their problems and
repair them singlehandedly. I’d hate to live my whole life without having had an impact on the course of things in our great world. I wonder, will I achieve my impossible dream? I don’t think so! (2017, pg. 161-162 emphasis in the original)

Years later, she commented on the YouTube video she posted of herself driving in 2011 where she mentioned that ‘We want change in the country’ (2017, pg. 316). The act of driving took a new meaning else:

it was completely different. I felt Wajeha’s eyes on me and her presence as a witness. I felt the gaze of the camera as a witness. Like other people of my generation, who had been gathering in city squares and on street corners across North Africa and the Middle East, who were raising their voices and their hands and using their cell phones and cameras to stand up to repression, authoritarianism, and tradition, we were at that moment pushing back against one of Saudi Arabia’s most enduring cultural taboos. We were taking a chance to express the basic aspirations of Saudi women. With Wajeha beside me, I felt that we were now in “the driver’s seat of our own destiny. (2017, pg. 316)

She wants to change the reality of her son's generation because her mother couldn't change hers. This too is radical because in fact her mother changed her own future significantly through focusing on education as the means available to her. Asking her mother what she unable to do was unrealistic.

From within her devotion as a practicing Muslim, Al-Sharif found inspiration for her feminist activism. She studied the Qur’an and other Islamic texts, finding a strong basis for women’s rights in these texts. Al-Sharif’s activism was what I call an informative gender ideology/activism that takes places through a transformative religious ideology/experience.

Consciousness. Al-Sharif ’s sense of identity flows from her beliefs: what she believed to be true and important about herself. Al-Sharif held several core identities that shaped how she saw and understood herself in relation to the world around her.

Islam represents a core personal identity for Al-Sharif. She displayed strong values deeply rooted in her identity as a practicing Muslim. While her religious beliefs and practices as a Muslim changed over time, she has remained a Muslim throughout. Her overall religious stances shifted dramatically, for example, as Al-Sharif matured and it progressed from what she called ‘compliant’ or multazima (2017, pg. 206) to extremist or akin to ‘religious fanaticism’ (2017, pg. 206) to what I
consider ‘critical’, in which she engages with the religion, its teachings, and its leaders from a more critical standpoint, searching for her own answers and coming to her own conclusions.

Yet, she has never stopped being Muslim. Throughout these changes, she remained Muslim, by which I mean a practicing Muslim. She prayed five times each day, unless circumstances did not permit it, something which happened several times when she was in the custody of Saudi authorities, an occurrence she noted with great distress. Each time she was arrested, she pleaded to be able to pray; most times, she was denied. This reveals hypocrisy on the part of the authorities.

Such practices—prayer, celebrating important religious holidays, etc.—are ways to infer Al-Sharif’s religiosity. She also spoke of prayer outside of the daily ritual of prayer. She wrote of praying to Allah, asking for help when she was in custody and prison. Even before going with the people who come knocking at her door 2 a.m., this is what she did after making phone calls to friends:

I decided to pray. I went upstairs. In the hallway leading to my small bedroom. I performed two raka‘as (the full cycle of an Islamic prayer, spoken while standing, sitting, and prostrating) and asked for God to show me the way. It was now nearly four in the morning. In a little over an hour the sky would be streaked with the first hint of desert sun. I felt something inside me say, “Go, Manal. You’ll be okay.”

I composed myself, walked downstairs, and opened the door. (2017, pg. 17)

What scholars describe as Islamic feminism in terms of an Islamic standpoint, meaning that women who engage in Islamic feminism do so from an Islamic standpoint, seems to apply well to Al-Sharif. She is a practicing Muslim and has been so for her entire life. Whatever she does in life flows from that standpoint, that context. Everything she does, even the acts that one identifies as not Islamic, has a direct impact or connection to the context of being a lifelong practicing Muslim. It could be argued that it is not possible to understand anything she does, including her activism, without understanding her religious context, without analyzing it from within an Islamic framework.

27 Like her love affair with her first husband prior to marriage and her meeting him alone unveiled. She expressed feelings of guilt during those moments (Chapter 4 will elaborate her politics towards love and marriage).
But as we saw from her memoir, there are many ‘Islamic frameworks’. Thus, it is important to note that I have been analysing her work from within her Islamic framework. In this case, this means an individual experience of a religious practice in a context where the state has passed on certain areas of rule to religious authorities. In this context it is radical to proclaim one’s religious devotion whilst denying its altered power when filtered through other forms of authority.

Al-Sharif clearly views herself and her religiosity within a broad spectrum. She interprets her own experience and practice of Islam among many other equally legitimate experiences. Her background, family, neighborhood, education, region of origin, etc. all had a profound impact on how she both understood and reproduced that religiosity. For Al-Sharif, this realisation was reached through a process of transformation and a journey from extremism to what others may consider another form of extremism (from far right to far left, if interpreted by Saudi standards). This transformative process, we could say, is ongoing, rather than static. The extent to which Al-Sharif maintains her Islamic standpoint gives her a unique vantage point in the world. The totality of Al-Sharif’s experience, which includes her networks, such as kin, friends, and professional relationships, shaped what was possible and impossible for her; it shaped the entire story of her intersectional activism. She cites numerous examples of her religiosity in daily life that together demonstrate, in part, what Islam means for Al-Sharif and how it might fuse with her feminism to produce her unique expression of Islamic feminism. Al-Sharif consistently engaged in a variety of Islamic rituals including daily prayer (five times per day), fasting, and Islamic holidays, most importantly Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr. She described the plethora of daily rituals she was taught to perform as a child, many of which she continued to perform into her adulthood. Reading these rituals, the readers senses the intensity required to uphold them:

There were other daily ritual washings to be performed. Each day the mouth had to be cleaned, then the nose, then the face, and then the hands and elbows, then you wiped your hair and finally your feet. There were specific prayers to be said before washing and after, which were impossible to forget because of the stickers all around to remind us. There were stickers on the bathroom door with the prayer to be said before entering the bathroom, stickers of prayers to be said before leaving the house or the school. When you’re stopped at a traffic light, that too is a time to pray. You should say Astaghfiru Allah, God forgive me,
God forgive me, over and over, until the light changes. These were on top of our other obligations, such as reading the Koran and the five daily acts of prayer, both of which had their own set of required ablutions. And veiling.

This younger generation who are taught about proper religiosity works as a force to change the religiosity of their parents: “It was the younger generation, my cousins, who imposed this level of segregation and religiosity on their elders and set these draconian rules for their parents, rather than the other way around. I remember my aunt saying, “I’m so thankful that my kids are teaching me about Islam.” (2017, pg. 129)

Al-Sharif’s background as a child of an immigrant woman arguably played an important role in the development of her gender identity—what it means to be a girl, a woman—and her understanding of the limitations and possibilities for women and girls in Saudi society. It also gave Al-Sharif a critical eye and enabled her to challenge existing Saudi customs. Her mother was born in Libya and raised in Egypt and Al-Sharif had the opportunity to travel to Egypt and visit her family on numerous occasions growing up, which, as she notes in the memoir, made strong impressions on her and offered a different example of how a woman can be in society. For example, she noticed that Egyptian women did not wear the niqāb or ‘abāya. Many did not even wear the hijāb. As a child, she was fascinated by these differences. As a radicalised teen, she eventually stopped going to Egypt altogether, deeming it then to be full of infidels and riven with examples of ḥarām (forbidden). It is noteworthy how she described other Muslims as infidels.

This immigrant position is an important one to consider, however, in the formation of her Islamic feminism. Her mother, we learn in the memoir, was unlike many Saudi mothers even as she adapted herself to Saudi customs over time. She describes her mother’s fierce independence, breaking with gender customs to fight for herself and her family. One poignant example consists of Al-Sharif’s mother single-handedly ensuring that all of her children went to school, even showing up to the boys’ school to enroll her son, an act prohibited by gender segregation customs:

My mother, however, refused to live like a typical Saudi woman. She refused to stay shut up in the apartment. She would go out alone, without her guardian or a mahram. She refused to have no means of employment, so she sewed, which had been her childhood hobby. She sewed dresses for my sister and me, and she made clothes for her friends and acquaintances, earning her own small income independent of my father. It was our mother who took us to get vaccinated at the health clinic, who decided where we could go, what we could do, and what was safe. And it was our mother who was determined that each of her children should
receive an education. She was the one who went by herself to enroll us in school, first primary school, then middle school, and then secondary school. She even registered my younger brother in the boys’ school, something almost unheard of for a woman.

I remember how the school guard at the boys’ primary school stopped her at the gate and barred her from entering, but Mama refused to move until the deputy administrator came out to see her. Again and again, he tried to dismiss her and send her on her way, his tongue clucking against the roof of his mouth, repeating that my father had to be present to register my brother. But my mother refused to leave, and finally, the deputy administrator relented. Almost twenty-five years later, he came to my mother’s funeral and told my brother that Mama was the reason why he received an education. (2017, pg. 86-88)

Al-Sharif also recounts a further bold move undertaken by her mother on learning that a neighbor's son had approached Al-Sharif and her sister and insisted they remove their underwear for him:

The usual custom would have been to wait for my father to return home from work and have him deal with the issue, but Mama’s patience would not allow it. She pulled her abaya over her head and dragged my sister and me by our hands to the neighbor’s home. My mother found the boy and started screaming. He yelled back, and although they battled with words alone, to me standing there it seemed dangerously close to physical fighting. “I swear to God,” my mother warned him, “if you ever approach either of my daughters again—in the building or on the street—I will cut off your male parts and hang them round your neck!” (2017, pg. 107)

There are numerous examples in the memoir of Al-Sharif’s mother acting defiantly, breaking with customs regarding the appropriate conduct of women to ensure the best outcome for her family.

Al-Sharif grew up with this arguably feminist role model. It is no small thing for a young Saudi girl to watch her mother act so independently. On account of her mother's actions, she also grew up thinking that the education of girls and women was important. She pushed her children to excel in their studies and, according to Al-Sharif, prioritised the girls' studies over their domestic obligations.

Notwithstanding these significant events, Al-Sharif and her siblings were regularly subjected to domestic violence from both of their parents. Al-Sharif’s mother, we learn, once beat Al-Sharif so badly once she almost killed her, and at other times left scars on her face which she is now proud of. As she expressed in her tweets, they taught her how to forgive but also to rise above oppression.
Her mother was also guilty of neglect and verbal abuse, but despite these painful memories, Al-Sharif has shared on Twitter how she sees her mother as a source of inspiration, a woman who has endured and persevered through her own tremendous suffering. She echoes these sentiments in her memoir when, after describing her mother’s passing after stage four breast cancer diagnosis: ‘She was an amazing woman who will always be my inspiration’ (2017, pg. 574).

The shifts in her consciousness were largely influenced by three key periods in Al-Sharif’s life: attending university in Jeddah; working at Aramco; and living in the US for two years as an Aramco employee. Exposed to different ways of thinking and living, she gradually used her new experiences to shed light on her beliefs and on her past. She struggled to find justification for the unequal treatment of women, not because she did not see unjust treatment of women outside of Saudi Arabia but because she was more able to articulate the experience of injustice. She experienced unequal treatment first-hand repeatedly, even at her job at Aramco, from the blatantly differential treatment given to men and women to certain opportunities she could not access simply because she was a woman (especially a Saudi woman). So, she faced this double discrimination at work at two levels: as a Saudi and as a woman. At that point, it did not make any sense to her. In her view, when choosing to challenge these actions she was not challenging Islam or Saudi law; she was challenging custom. Her fight, specifically, was with the custom that passed as law, acted as law, but, crucially, was not law.

Becoming a mother, and later in her role as a single mother after she and her first husband divorced, further contributed to her burgeoning activism. Here she explains in an interview to NPR how she became an ‘accidental activist’:

I think it chose me. I didn't choose it. As a single mom, I was divorced with a son and I had a car and I had a driver's license, but I couldn't drive my car. I was paying the installments for this car for five years. That was very frustrating. I almost got kidnapped once because I couldn't find a car to take me back home…It's a daily struggle to find a car to do anything in your life in a country where there's no public transportation and our cities are not pedestrianfriendly. It was a continuous struggle, and it was very empowering that I know how to drive. I have a car and I have a driver's license. When I knew that there is no law, I was thinking, "Well, if there's no law, so why are we not driving?" It was accumulating, it didn't just happen overnight. (2017c)
This positionality, as a single divorced mother, shaped and contributed to her activism. The daily constraints imposed on her by the driving ban became more pronounced as a single mother; she experienced first-hand how mobility contributes to liberty and living a full life and she critiqued the continuous struggle she faced with those limitations. It is interesting here to note how the seemingly more mundane action of taking one's child to school contributed to a nuanced critique that took Al-Sharif beyond this domestic irritation towards a broader understanding of the consequences of that limitation. For Al-Sharif, this was an example of the feminist mantra that the personal is political.

Action. Social limitations are, of course, experienced and understood differently by women depending on a host of economic and class characteristics. Al-Sharif grew up poor in a mixed class family; Al-Sharif’s father came from a village outside of Makkah. He did not attend school, was illiterate, and drove taxis for a living. Both of her parents were divorced, making their marriage the second one for both of them. As Al-Sharif writes, ‘So Mama left her life of comfort and even opulence in Alexandria to marry a Saudi man with no education and a menial job, to live in a walk-up apartment without regular running water or a telephone’ (2017, pg. 85). She was made aware of her economic situation during primary school when she was a kid, she narrates the incident:

In the beginning, I brought my own food. Each day, Mama sent me with a cheese sandwich and a drink. Then one day, one of the teachers pulled me aside and asked me if everything was okay at home with my family. I said yes. She asked why I brought my own meal rather than pocket money to buy breakfast. The only girls who brought their own food to school were the poor girls, because they couldn’t afford to pay for breakfast at school. My face turned red, I was so embarrassed to think that anyone at school would consider me poor. After that, I asked Mama for pocket money and she gave it to me” (2017a, pg. 101)

She was always conscious of her family’s economic situation afterwards, comparing them to other family members, such as her father’s siblings and their children. One poignant memory revolved around that of new clothes for Eid:

On the second day of Eid, and despite Mama’s objections, we always went with Abouya to eat breakfast and lunch at the house of Uncle Sa’ad, my father’s older—and only—brother. The atmosphere in his house was very different from Aunt Zein’s. Because money was tight, Mama bought my sister and me only one dress each for Eid; in fact, often she sewed them
herself. I wore this dress on all special occasions throughout the whole of the following year, since I would outgrow it by the time the next Eid came around. Invariably, when I entered Uncle Sa’ad’s house, one of his older daughters would say with a sneer, “Oh look, the same dress as yesterday!” (2017, pg. 103-104)

As a child, she wore the modest school uniform required of all girls:

Each year my mother made me two school dresses, which I alternated day to day. I wore them until they were little more than threadbare rags. The style and colors were dictated by the General Administration for Girls’ Education: dark green for primary school, dark brown for middle school, and navy for secondary school […] Most of my girlfriends had pretty dresses that had been redesigned by their moms or tailors with better shades of green and nicer colors. In primary school, Mama sent me off each morning in one of the ugly dresses and my hair plaited in two braids, tied with white ribbon at the ends. (2017, pg. 143-144).

This austerity and childhood humiliation may have also contributed to Al-Sharif’s decision to wear the niqāb and gloves when she was ten years old (before it was required) driven by her desire to emulate and please her religious teacher:

The first time I wore a veil, I was ten years old. I had seen my favorite teacher, the religious studies teacher, Miss Sanaa, leaving school dressed completely in black, an abaya over her body, a niqab covering for her face, hiding everything, even her eyes. Her feet and hands were covered in black socks and gloves. I went home and told Mama that I wanted to wear the niqab and gloves. She was surprised, but she bought me the pieces and taught me how to wear them. My sister laughed at me, but I refused to be discouraged. Instead, I felt very grown up as I walked to school the next day, bursting with pride.

But as I made my way home in the afternoon, I discovered that the niqab was a rather difficult piece of clothing for our hot climate. It was hard to breathe through the dark fabric as it drew up against my mouth and nose. The gloves made it impossible to get a proper hold on anything. But I had to keep wearing my new covering; it would be far too embarrassing to tell Mama that I had just as quickly changed my mind. (2017, pg. 192-193).

The experience of being made fun of because of the ugly uniform and the proud experience of wearing the gloves and the niqāb shows how class and religion intersect in Al-Sharif’s life. The ugly uniform betrayed her class, so people dared to humiliate her; wearing the gloves and niqāb indicated high religiosity and virtue which are highly regarded by society and concealed her class; thus, her feeling of pride. She was the same person but changing her dress code spurred different reactions from people.

Dress is not only connected to class but also reflected in Al-Sharif’s evolving relationship to her religious practice. Al-Sharif seems awed by the experiences and she strictly adhered to customary Islamic dress code as she grew up and into adulthood. But later she stopped wearing the
niqāb. And then the ‘abāya. And then the ḥijāb. Over time, she changed her dress completely. Dress perfectly demonstrates the intertwined nature of religion and custom in Saudi Arabia. For Al-Sharif to stop wearing these garments, it seems that she ceased participation in a cultural custom rather than a religious one, for her. This makes her act dependent upon a personal evaluation and interpretation of religious texts.

As an adult, Al-Sharif experimented with her attire and the degree to which she adhered to the customary dress code, particularly once she joined Aramco as an IT specialist. At first, she started covering her hair with a colored shawl in place of a black veil at work while maintaining the black ‘abāya (2017a). Her new husband, however, whom she met at work, insisted that she begin wearing the niqāb at work after their marriage ceremony, something they fought over regularly. It forced her to reflect on her stance on the niqāb: ‘I had thought long and hard and was finally persuaded that it was okay for a Muslim woman to show her face’ (2017a, pg. 364). Yet, she acquiesced to her husband’s demand and began wearing the niqāb at work, describing its effect on the development of her feminist consciousness as well as on her personality and interactions at work:

How odd it is that we judge a woman by her clothes and the place she eats lunch and the subjects she talks about with her colleagues on her coffee break, yet we don’t judge a man if he doesn’t grow his beard or if he works with women or speaks to them. Why do Saudi women allow subjugation to a man and adhere to men’s rules and conditions? Why did I?

The niqab had a bizarre effect on me; without intending to, I became more and more introverted. I should have been competing with my workmates when we delivered presentations, but I found myself holding back. I no longer fearlessly entered into debates: such behavior didn’t seem to fit with my new attire. Because no one at work could see my facial expressions, I would even carry a card with a happy face on one side and a sad face on another, so I could display my feelings. Otherwise, the niqab numbed me. (2017, pg. 364).

This experience with face cover can be compared with Al-Sharif’s experiences at different ages. The ten-year-old Manal ‘bursting with pride’ (pg. 133) for choosing to wear it in imitation of her favourite teacher can be contrasted with adult Manal who knows that according to Islam she has a choice not to cover her face but was denied that choice for customary reasons. The imitation is
replaced by informed knowledge, so that pride changed into a feeling of numbness reflected in her interior life and changing her outward behaviour once she was forced to wear the covering.

The politics of dress in Saudi Arabia is demonstrated in these memories from Al-Sharif’s upbringing. The importance given to dress in Al-Sharif’s lived experiences is not only indicative of the religious connotations of dress but also the economic, consumerist, and class categories she became aware of through dress at a young age. Dress, furthermore, reflects one’s ethnic background. In spite of the requirement that all girls within Makkah wear identical clothes, forms of resistance can be found in the variations of the shades of the mandatory colour or the slight modifications in style.

**Developing a Feminist Consciousness**

Al-Sharif shows us, throughout her memoir, how her feminist consciousness developed over time, and how the seeds were planted at various points in her life, taking root as time went on. Key moments in her narrative reveal how a few events in particular made her see life in Saudi Arabia differently, including attending university in Jeddah, a much more liberal and cosmopolitan city than Makkah; getting hired first as a summer intern and then as a permanent employee as a computer scientist for Aramco, the Saudi national oil company; and living and working on the Aramco compound. Al-Sharif described the Aramco compound as a world completely separate from the rest of Saudi society, more like a Hollywood set, where there is no gender segregation, men and women work together, and women drive cars; her two-year stay in the US, in New Hampshire, as an Aramco employee where she studied and received training and during which she took driving classes, got her New Hampshire driver’s license, and drove her own car only amplified these feelings.

The same periods in her life that were particularly significant in terms of her evolution of religious beliefs and ideology corresponded with changes to her beliefs on gender, women, and women’s place in society. This is when her activism started taking root. The early period in the
development of her feminist consciousness, which would eventually fuel her activism, was attending university in Jeddah. In addition to the myriad differences she observed in the way the city operated, the conduct of young men and women, much more liberal in comparison to Makkah, she also for the first time, three years into her studies, had access to the internet. At first, holding onto her radical beliefs, she tried hard to only use the internet for her studies, since much of what is on the internet was considered ḥarām. But eventually she gave in to her curiosity and started reading international news and politics, learning about opposition to the kingdom and critiques of her religious beliefs – all new to her. This newfound exposure to other viewpoints, the happenings in other parts of the world, and how people outside Saudi Arabia saw the condition of Saudi women, challenged the way she saw the world. The attacks of 9/11 in the US the following year, the year after she discovered the internet, was the final event that made her walk away from radicalism. She could not be associated with a belief system that justified the murder of thousands of innocent people, now loosely referred to by many Saudis as the ‘ṣaḥwa times’.

When she finished college that year and started working at Aramco the next, the Islamic standpoint that replaced her radicalism allowed her to pursue a position in which she was the only woman in the entire department, with dozens of men as her co-workers and peers, and eventually to a two-year stay in the US. The feminist awakening that started at university in Jeddah continued to grow as she lived and worked on the Aramco compound and lived and worked in the US. She accepted these opportunities to see another way of life and she came to appreciate and enjoy living on the compound and in the US. A clash with Saudi customs seems almost inevitable from this view.

Yet, it was hardly inevitable. Even as ideology fuels action, they are not one and the same. As she became more informed about her country, her religion, and the larger world, and her beliefs about Islam and women changed, Al-Sharif still had to make choices about what to do with this new information and new beliefs. She still had to make the decision to act. And acted, although she
claims that ‘activism chose her’, not the other way around. Throughout her memoir, Al-Sharif shares big and small moments where she expresses her agency by speaking her mind, standing up for herself, going against the grain, taking a risk, being bold. Small moments are often not so small at all; they can even be life-threatening. She was often quite calculated in her actions, knowing what risks she took, what she could possibly get away with, how to provoke the authorities, how to protect herself, how to ensure that if she was arrested and taken to jail, she would not disappear and never be heard from again; too many people knew who she was and would fight for her release; she had something more powerful than a lawyer; she had people power. She had a swath of domestic and global online civil society supporting her, campaigning for her release through #freeManal which was a Twitter hashtag for Women2Drive Campaign, and she knew that they would as long as they knew what had happened to her. She made sure to get the word out before she went anywhere with the secret police who knocked on her door at 2am. Social media was the weapon she needed to protect herself, not a lawyer.

**Disentangling law and custom: Manal Al-Sharif’s use of legal tactics.** Al-Sharif used the law in effective and creative ways to further her cause. In fact, the approach that Al-Sharif employed for her activism was largely legal. The entire premise behind her decision to drive as a form of protest for the first time, filming it to be shared with the world on YouTube, was that getting behind the wheel as a woman was not, in fact, illegal. Al-Sharif had long bemoaned the driving ban with her friends until one day her friend told her that it is not technically illegal. She studied the traffic code in its entirety, finding no mention at all of women or gender, let alone of a ban on women drivers. She was thus confident that she could not be charged or convicted of a crime and the authorities could not put her in prison. The law would protect her.

Learning that it was perfectly legal for her to drive a car, she felt empowered to act in resistance to this ban. This itself reveals her ideology: because it was custom and not codified into law, Al-Sharif felt she did not have to obey it. She herself valued law over custom, respected law over custom, or perhaps simply feared law over custom. In any case, once she learned the truth, a
shift took place. She felt that she should have the right to challenge a custom. In the following passage, she describes her response to learning that driving as a woman was not in violation of the traffic code:

I read the entire traffic code. At first I felt nothing but anger. Then, slowly, I began to reread each word, aloud. I went through each line of the code. There was not one reference to the gender of the driver. Pages 117 to 121 listed all possible traffic violations and offenses. None of them included “driving while female.” Nothing, absolutely nothing, in the official Saudi traffic code indicated it was illegal for women to drive.

Now I was truly angry. I wanted to call someone, to tell someone, but whom? Instead, I went back to my computer and started typing. I searched three simple words—Saudi, women, and driving. (2017, pg. 427-428)

Al-Sharif’s decision to defy the ban by driving was strategic as was the act itself. By deciding to be filmed driving and posting it publicly on YouTube, she was making the bold decision to share her identity and become the face of the #Women2Drive movement. She was keen to share her name and be seen on video so the world would know that the campaign was not fabricated by outside forces, but instead reflected the demands of a real Saudi woman. She describes her decisionmaking process in this passage:

I had an idea. I thought that if, prior to the event on June 17, someone posted a video of a woman driving, it might “normalize” the experience and show Saudi citizens that there was nothing dangerous about women driving. I also wanted to prove that many of us already knew how to drive—that we had licenses and even cars. And I wanted to prove that the Saudi authorities would not stop a woman driver. For weeks, I had heard people say, “If you drive, the man-wolves will eat you alive.” I wanted to show that there were no “man-wolves,” and a woman could drive without fear. So I decided to film myself. (2017, pg. 309)

But deciding to do it was one thing; actually doing it was another.

I was filled with a combination of excitement and anxiety. I was about to become even more of a public face. I hadn’t slept much in the preceding two weeks and my small town house was bustling with energetic people who wanted to help with the campaign. It had become our de facto headquarters. We posted updates, but we also delegated. A Brazilian artist, Carlos Latuff, created a logo for the campaign that depicted a Saudi woman wearing a niqab sitting behind the wheel of a car with her hand raised in a victory sign. But I knew that we and I had to be careful. Women2Drive couldn’t be seen as an actual protest movement. I clung to the belief that if I could just show Saudi society that no harm would come if a woman drove, many of the other issues surrounding the campaign would simply vanish. (2017a, pg. 453454)
In the video, she speaks her full name and shows her face, wearing big, dark sunglasses but no *niqāb*. She writes in the memoir about how she carefully planned each detail for the video, including her appearance, all of which was based on a strategy of high visibility:

…I made myself a strong cup of coffee, dressed in the most conservative outfit I owned, and laid my black hijab on the bed. I looked at myself in the mirror, and made a decision not to put on my usual kohl eyeliner. I knew I had to do everything to minimize my appearance so that people would focus only on the driving. After a few minutes, I left the bedroom and sat down at the dining room table, reviewing my driving plan. It would be simple but very visible, and the more I imagined it, the more I excited became. (2017, pg. 310)

From this passage, it is clear that her choices were not based on expressions of individual identity. Even though she had long stopped wearing the ‘*‘abāya* and *ḥijāb* at work, she knew that anything but a customarily conservative appearance would distract from her core message: that it should be acceptable for women to drive cars in Saudi Arabia. The sunglasses served to cover some of her face even as she refused to wear the *niqāb*, which she had stopped wearing altogether years before. Arguably, all of the strategic decisions she made regarding the video—to defy the ban by driving, to film it, to reveal her identity, to post it publicly on YouTube—all emerged from the legal premise of her activism that her actions broke no laws. She was unafraid to go against custom and defy the ban, show her face and share her name because she was confident in the legality of her conduct.

When she was arrested for driving, she maintained her legal strategy, defending her action before the colonel at the police station in the following way:

“Do you know that what you did is illegal?” the colonel asked.

“Sir,” I replied, “I did not violate any traffic code. According to Section 32 of the Traffic Statute, there is no gender specification in the driver’s license application. In fact, there is nothing in the statute anywhere that says women can’t drive.”

He leaned back in his chair. “You can cite the statute?”

“Yes. I’ve been studying the code for days, sir.”

He sat still for a moment, silently assessing me. Finally he said, “Well, you need a Saudi license to drive here.”
“Sir, true, but,” I said, without blinking, “I am allowed to use my valid foreign driver’s license for up to three months until I get a Saudi one.” I reached into my bag and handed him my completed driver’s license application, glad I had been carrying it with me. I could nearly hear the colonel think, Oh my God, who the hell is this woman? (2017, pg. 462-463)

However, defying unwritten laws and customs could have unpredictable consequences. As she recounts:

They had taken me from my house at 4:00 a.m., without warning, without allowing me to call a lawyer, without a warrant. I had begged the men who had interrogated me to let me call my son, but they didn’t allow me to call anyone. It was as if I had disappeared. And they could detain me indefinitely. It was done. There are people in jail in Saudi Arabia, even women, who have languished there for years without a trial or a sentence.

I started yelling at the two men in the front seat. “Where are you taking me? Sir, please talk to me, where are you taking me? It’s my right to know where you are taking me.”

They remained silent.

“You can’t just do this, I am not a criminal!” I screamed. “How could you take me to jail without papers, without a ruling, without being sentenced in the court?” (2017, pg. 49)

Here, citing the illegality of the actions of the police, Al-Sharif shows her informed position. But she considered herself victorious at the end in this confrontation of custom versus law. In one passage, after she had been taken to the police station with her brother she pressed the officers again and again to admit why she was being detained. Finally, they relented and said it was for going against custom. For her, it was a small victory to force them to just say it out loud. This was her political strategy, in essence. She writes:

“Sir, I broke no statute,” I said again. “Tell me now what code I broke, and I will sign. What code did I break?”

After a minute he said softly, “You broke orf.” In Saudi society, orf means tradition or custom, a practice or convention. It is not the official code.

I turned to the chief and said very deliberately, “I want to hear both of you say it, please repeat it.”
“Orf. You broke orf.”

“Say it again.”

“Orf. You broke orf.”

167
“Good, we agree. I broke no traffic code.” It was a small victory, but I wanted to prove to at least the men in the room that I had broken no Saudi statute by driving.” (2017, pg. 467-468)

Pulling Back the Curtain: How Bans Based on Saudi Custom Operate in Practice

The fact that Al-Sharif was imprisoned for nine days for driving a car shows how much weight custom, when justified through religion, has on official and societal levels in Saudi context. The fact that she was released after nine days shows how much weight the internet and social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter can have in garnering national and global support in today’s reality. Al-Sharif relied on social media to challenge all the restrictions and injustices she faced. It began in 2010 with a Facebook group called Saudi Female Employees of Aramco: ‘we started writing our demands. We wanted day care nurseries for babies in the workplace and to be allowed access to the company car’ (Al-Sharif, 2017, pg. 288). In 2011 a friend invited her to join a Facebook event called “We are driving May 17th.” The event was being organized by a young woman named Bahiya. At the time the Arab Spring was taking place and ‘Facebook was the chief means of organizing the near daily protests in Egypt and was playing a role in Tunisia and Libya as well. All of us had seen how a Facebook event and post could pick a date and issue a call for action. I wanted this to be a big event, well beyond forty-seven female drivers’ (Al-Sharif, 2017, pg. 295). However in Saudi Arabia she learned that it is Twitter that is more popular:

In 2011, Twitter was the preferred form of social media for Saudis. Saudi Arabia had more than 5 million Twitter accounts and about 2.4 million active Twitter users, defined as people who log in at least once a month. Twitter was the way to get our message out, my friend explained. So I learned to use Twitter.

I registered my account under the handle @Women2Drive, uploaded a photo that one of our supporters had designed, and in the profile bio, I wrote, “We call on all Saudi women to drive on June 17.”

Within days, @Women2Drive had thousands of followers.

The movement quickly took on a life of its own. At night, once Aboudi was in bed, I posted items on Facebook. I tried my hand at writing press releases and getting blog posts. I wrote
petitions for signatures and designed a logo. The enthusiasm was powerful. People were visiting our Facebook event page and retweeting our tweets. Within a week, people were coming to my house, asking if they could help. (2017, pg. 295-96)

She continued using the social media to raise awareness of Saudi women’s issues like the ‘I am My Own Guardian’ campaign and asking to free the women activist detainees.

However, Al-Sharif does not keep her activism online; she takes an active legal approach through driving past authorities deliberately and the consequences that followed, she made explicit that the ban on women driving was indeed not against any law. Thus, her imprisonment was extrajudicial, widening the support she received from the international community. The outpouring of support was massive as demonstrated by the letters Al-Sharif received after her release:

Omar al-Johani, my Aramco colleague who had tweeted the details of my arrest from behind the bushes by my house at 2:00 a.m., posted his personal PO box number online and encouraged people worldwide to send me letters and cards. I received piles of them; the most beautiful was a computer mouse in the shape of a car. (2017, pg. 542)

By focusing on legality and using social media platforms to share her message, she built her case to be seized easily by the international community. Her activism revealed just how much ‘custom’ rather than ‘law’ rules Saudi Arabia. Al-Sharif’s interpretation for being jailed for ‘daring to drive’ could be linked back to the compromise made by the government to Islamists so that Juhayman’s incident does not happen again and women were caught in the middle of this multilevel discrimination. Others may link it to an even further historical moment of state formation when the ‘Wahhabi’ ulamā’were granted primary control over issues related to religion, culture, custom, and proper public conduct in order to be in accordance with their view of the ‘pious life’. Al-Sharif’s activism and e-activism, as realized through the intersection of religion, class, gender, and education, showcased this dynamic where politics, law, religion, and tribal custom intersect.

The context of tribal customs and politics is important here. In using an intersectional perspective, I consider how her identity and positionality as a Hijazi (born and raised in Makkah with Hijazi relatives on her father’s side living in rural villages outside of Makkah) might also influence her Islamic feminism and her activism. There is longstanding tension between the Hijazi
and Najdi cultures, the latter dominating Saudi Arabia since the birth of the nation-state and the two rulers fighting for control of the peninsula that ended in the Najdis’ favor. Perhaps because Al-Sharif is a ‘cosmopolitan’ Hijazi, she is better able to recognize the difference between religion and custom than if she was one who never had access to other places and virtual spaces, where the two would be seen as one. Her family held onto Hijazi traditions: her aunt dressed in traditional Hijazi garb rather than the ‘abāya, and her grandmother’s village, where Al-Sharif lived during the Gulf War, operated in dramatically different ways than her family and other families in Makkah, with girls performing farm labor alongside boys, no gender segregation, and women wearing their veils in a slightly more revealing and practical manner. As a Hijazi, she had such family members and thus opportunities to see a different way of life. As a Hijazi girl, she grew up learning Hijazi customs which could arguably have given her a keener eye to recognize when custom was justified in the name of religion or law but was neither. Together, these details allowed Al-Sharif a different standpoint to observe the diversity of life in Saudi Arabia, for women in particular.

**Political Dissidence and Exile as a Standpoint**

Al-Sharif has a clear political stance, one in which she freely critiques the male guardianship system, proclaiming that ‘There can be no modern Saudi kingdom as long as women are still ruled by men. It may take a long time, but I do believe that kingdom will come’ (2017, pg. 579). When explaining the practicalities of Saudi women being banned from driving in Chapter 1, she states,

> It is an amazing contradiction: a society that frowns on a woman going out without a man; that forces you to use separate entrances for universities, banks, restaurants, and mosques; that divides restaurants with partitions so that unrelated males and females cannot sit together; that same society expects you to get into a car with a man who is not your relative, with a man who is a complete stranger, by yourself and have him take you somewhere inside a locked car, alone. (2017, pg. 28)

She recounts a terrifying encounter one night when, stranded without any available driver to pick her up after her doctor’s appointment outside the Aramco compound, she noted a car following her and the driver rolling down his window to stare at her:
In Saudi Arabia, harassment isn’t a criminal offense. The authorities, especially the religious police, always blame the woman. They say she was harassed because of how she looked or because of the way she was walking or because she was wearing perfume. They make you the criminal. (2017, pg. 30)

That particular encounter left Al-Sharif feeling shaken. What she did next contributed to her politicization and placed social media in a central role in what I call her early e-activism and conscious raising:

When I got home that night, I poured out my complaints on Facebook: the degradation of having to find a driver, of always worrying about being late, or being left somewhere, of trying to cobble together a patchwork of rides from relatives and drivers whose numbers I hoarded in my phone. I ended my post by promising to drive outside the Aramco compound on my birthday and take videos and upload them to YouTube. David, one of my American friends from New Hampshire, wrote on my Facebook wall “trouble-maker,” and I replied, “no, history-maker.” But even then, I didn’t believe myself. I thought I was bluffing. (2017, pg. 30)

The political stance Al-Sharif took is one that seems to only be possible in exile, although she did not know it at the time—part of her ‘accidental’ activism, as she describes her journey as an activist. The backlash she experienced online and at work, including harassment, physical threats, and even death threats, after she was released from prison, became too much to bear. That was when she realized she needed to go into exile: ‘I realized I had no choice; I had to leave Saudi Arabia’ (2017, pg. 558).

This self-imposed exile is part of the aftermath of her activism, the consequences of her mostly calculated actions. The story of her activism is incomplete without paying attention to the effects it has, both direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional. There were a lot of unintentional outcomes for Al-Sharif. She did not intend to go into exile. She did not intend to be separated from her firstborn son, her parents, her family, and everyone she knew. She did not intend to resign from her job at Aramco so that she could accept the invitation to receive an award she had won at the Olso Freedom Summit in 2012. Because she lived on the compound and was about to receive an interest-free company loan for her house, she also lost everything related to her housing, and was forced to move out without a clear idea of where to go.

---

28 This is not the case anymore. When the lifting the ban, Sudi Arania also criminalized harassment.
Her private life also contributed to her decision to leave Saudi Arabia. During this period, she had met a man from Brazil who joined her division at Aramco. They became friends, were later engaged to be married and planned to relocate to Dubai. But marrying a non-Saudi was not straightforward, even as he agreed to convert to Islam to be with her:

Rafael asked what he would have to do to marry me. My answer was simple: become a Muslim. But the reality was more complex. As a Saudi citizen (man or woman) you must have special permission from the interior minister to marry a non-Saudi. I asked for permission to marry Rafael, and the Saudi authorities refused. We could not marry in Dubai, either; its government said I needed permission from the Saudi embassy. So, Rafael took me to his home in Brazil to meet his family. He converted to Islam in the Rio de Janeiro Islamic Center, speaking the required profession of faith. We did not have a formal wedding because there was still no place to get married legally. Instead, a cousin of Rafael’s who is a lawyer in Montreal helped us get a civil marriage certificate from a law court in Canada. (2017, pg. 560)

She fought hard to win the right to have Aboudi travel to Dubai, even hiring Suhaïla Zain Al-Abdeen, the Islamic feminist scholar mentioned earlier who specializes in interpreting old legal texts, in order to appeal the first court decision denying her claim, which cited a tenth-century text as its justification. ‘We spent a week writing a twelve-page appeal citing passages from the Koran and the hadiths that justified my right to have my son visit’, writes Al-Sharif. ‘I handed the appeal to my lawyer and waited. But I lost again’ (2017, pg. 562-563). While Al-Sharif may have lost this case, her collaboration with Al-Abdeen may offer a glimpse of the potential of Islamic feminisms, taken from different angles whether exegesis or online activism, to further women’s causes and rights.

All these acts began with praying for guidance before going with the secret police:

I didn’t like the idea of going anywhere with these people. I didn’t want to leave my son and I still didn’t know exactly who was outside. But I kept thinking about what Kholoud had said. I decided to pray. I went upstairs. In the hallway leading to my small bedroom. I performed two raka’as (the full cycle of an Islamic prayer, spoken while standing, sitting, and prostrating) and asked for God to show me the way. It was now nearly four in the morning. In a little over an hour the sky would be streaked with the first hint of desert sun. I felt something inside me say, “Go, Manal. You’ll be okay.” (2017, pg. 20)
Al-Sharif and her brother went with the secret police, an act that, unbeknownst to them at the time, would be followed by a day in jail for Al-Sharif’s brother and nine days in a women’s prison for her. When she learned of her release, she immediately said a special prayer of thanks to God:

After [the prison head] had walked out, I let fall my tears of joy. I made sujood, a special prayer thanking Allah. I thought of Aboudi’s face. I thought about removing my dirty, filthy clothes, taking ten hot showers, and sleeping with Aboudi in my arms.” (2017, pg. 536)

The act of sujūd and the act of praying two raka‘as for guidance mentioned in the above quote are very significant for her as it shows her deep religiosity and the conviction that driving and defying custom it is not a religious issue at all.

The relief Al-Sharif felt over her release was quickly replaced by problems at work, harassment, and even death threats for her activism. Fear for her safety suddenly made exile seem like the only real option. She did not plan, expect, or intend to go into exile as a result of her activism, but it was one of its outcomes. Other activists may likely adjust their own tactics accordingly if they wish to avoid a similar fate. This is part of what made her activism, and her Islamic feminism, distinctive.

Yet, Al-Sharif’s exile is not typical. She still cannot speak completely freely because she still travels to Saudi Arabia to see Aboudi as her exile is self-imposed and she can still enter the kingdom. If she goes too far with what she says or does regarding the kingdom, she knows she could be charged with crimes and imprisoned. Most individuals in exile stay in exile, they do not return to their countries again. But because it is the only way she can be with her son in person, she has to consider the personal consequences she and Aboudi could bear if her activism outside the kingdom provokes an arrest by Saudi authorities. It is possible she has enough visibility and international support that protects her from any future arrest, but it is still a risk she lives with as she continues to fight for the rights and freedoms of Saudi women, as she describes in a 2017 interview with Terry Gross on “Fresh Air” after her memoir was released:
I'm always worried, every time I go to Saudi Arabia, I'm always worried, because you never know when you'll get arrested again, for a tweet or a retweet or something that I said in an interview like I'm doing now with you, something that slipped. So you have to always have this filter going on the whole time you talk. (Gross, 2017)

The response to Al-Sharif’s political actions as an individual and leader of a social movement is manifested in various ways by different individuals, groups and institutions within the kingdom. She was accused of being a spy, a terrorist, an agent sent by an organization that wants to improve women’s rights, and even having a mental disorder. She said that a fatwa was issued declaring her a non-Muslim and the imam where her father prays called her and other women attempting to drive ‘whores’. Other individuals, as manifested from responses to her tweets, were trying to shed skepticism around her authenticity as a Saudi or being from the Al-Sharif tribe. Her legitimacy was also questioned; after giving her speech in Oslo in 2012, an online survey along with the speech translated in Arabic was posted on Twitter, asking people if they consider her a traitor to Islam and Saudi Arabia to which 99% answered ‘yes’, and #Oslo-traitor was generated to defame her. It was, however, countered by #Oslo-hero. She said in one interview that she was treated as a terrorist suspect; the authorities emphasized that she was trying to destabilize the kingdom and they charged her accordingly. Al-Sharif said that if they deem you to be a threat to national security, they can essentially go into an extrajudicial mode, no laws apply to you; they can pick you up any time of day, arrest you, detain you in prison indefinitely. Anyone who speaks out like Al-Sharif did risks being marked as a terrorist threat or traitor (as with the more recent crackdown on three women activists who were imprisoned on 17 May 2018, and Al-Fassi who was imprisoned on 27 June 2018, all around or after the time of lifting the driving ban; they were all accused of treason).

While Al-Sharif’s action of driving a car did not protect her from imprisonment, the response from Saudi authorities to her activism revealed how the ban on women drivers, along with so many of the restrictions on women, and the Saudi public as a whole, actually operates. Even when the restrictions on women driving were heightened after the 1990 demonstration of 47 women, making it an official ban by royal decree, it was not made legal. Thus, technically, Al-
Sharif did not break a law by driving. But this is always how the legal code has operated in Saudi Arabia—more unofficial than official. The religious establishment has been strict in limiting the development of an official legal code, wanting to keep most legal matters under *shari‘a* law (Commins, 2015). *Shari‘a* law generally does not allow for precedence in decision-making among judges; rather, each case is taken up by the ‘ulamā’ as completely new, requiring a new consultation of the holy texts through reading and interpretation (Vogel, 2000). However, legal reforms have been made in recent years in response to judges’ complaints over the different decisions reached by judges for similar cases and their calls for unified laws.

The fact that she did not violate the legal code shows that most gender-related restrictions such as segregation, dress, work, conduct, use of public space, interaction, are embedded in stricter interpretation of Islam and mostly in custom rather than law. In Saudi Arabia, custom and law become blurred. Al-Sharif explains this legal complexity and blurring between custom and law as she recounts the night that the secret police banged on her door at 2am after she had been pulled over while driving her car with her brother in the passenger seat:

> In Saudi Arabia, our legal code is referred to not as “laws,” which devout Saudi Muslims believe can be given only by Allah; we use another word that translates into English roughly as “system.” The system says that no one can be arrested for a minor crime between the hours of sunset and sunrise. The same system also says that you cannot arrest anyone without a statement from a judge, unless the authorities consider you a threat to national security. But the men outside said nothing. After a few minutes had passed, they started knocking again. (2017, pg. 16-17)

Because the king and the establishments under his control, such as the religious police, exercise a great deal of authority, regardless of whether someone has broken an actual law, a person could still end up in prison for going against widely understood customs, as happened to Al-Sharif after she drove in public. The law could not protect her because it is still possible to be imprisoned for violating accepted conduct.

The kingdom is facing the dilemma of balancing the demands made by the ‘ulama’ and the majority of the people resisting Westernization and maintain the kingdom as religious because of its position in Islam with the health of the Saudi state as a whole, including its relations with other...
It is perhaps because of the national and international attention Al-Sharif generated, and the huge following of supporters created through social media, specifically Twitter and Facebook, that she did not disappear, that she is not still sitting in a woman’s prison, hoping today is the day she will be released. Her memoir also reveals that that her father, along with prominent men of her tribe, met King ‘Abd-Allah and asked for her release. She was indeed released immediately after this. It is an ironic situation that the same patriarchal and guardianship system she was trying to fight and dismantle is the one that engineered her release. Yet, these negotiations with patriarchal systems of power is an element of Islamic feminist activism that both Al-Sharif and Zuhur Wanisi have had to reckon with, as I will further discuss in Chapter 4.

CONCLUSION

Each story is singular; each life, each woman is unique. Manal Al-Sharif is unique. Yet through her uniqueness we see what is in all of us: our personal story. No one has lived anyone else’s life. So while her story cannot simply be transferred upon all Saudi women, in learning about her as a person, learning very intimate details about her life, including domestic violence, we see how one life has been lived by one person. We get the privilege of seeing the world through Al-Sharif’s eyes. Through her, we come to a greater understanding, a richer, more complex assessment of how religion, gender, and politics are beyond intertwined, how they are co-constituent; one cannot be understood without the other. Furthermore, religion, gender, and politics have not been static entities, but fluid and changing categories as manifested by the role social media has played in their intersection recently.
In applying an intersectional analysis to the case of Manal Al-Sharif, using her memoir and other writings, I have showcased Al-Sharif’s legal activism and what I call ‘e-activism’ as unique forms of Islamic feminism within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In analyzing and contextualizing Al-Sharif’s writings, I have argued that Manal Al-Sharif is a Saudi Islamic feminist such that her feminist beliefs and practices are distinctly Saudi, distinctly Islamic, and also distinctly hers. Her brand of Islamic feminism is revealed in its three principal dimensions—context, belief, and action—produced as a Saudi woman vis-à-vis Saudi society. Both Islam and her identity as a Muslim woman, as they intersect with the cultural institutions of media, education, gender, and class have shaped her Islamic feminist ideology and practices in complex and nuanced ways. While Al-Sharif does use Islam explicitly as a political tool on several occasions (such as hiring Suhaila Zain Al-Abdeen, the Islamic feminist scholar, to cite the Qur'an and Hadīth as part of her case over visitation rights with Aboudi), which represents one expression of Islamic feminism, Islam generally plays a more personal role for Al-Sharif in her memoir. Her Islamic feminism is one steeped in her identity as a Muslim woman, her beliefs and everyday practices as a Muslim, and her beliefs in gender equality and the rights of women.
CHAPTER 4: POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION, LANGUAGE, LOVE AND LOCATIONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDIES UTILISING A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

In the previous two chapters, I discussed how the case studies of women in Saudi Arabia and Algeria are embedded in their contexts from a historical perspective and demonstrated the vital role of religion in intersectional feminism and activism. I treated the two cases separately because each case deserved its due in-depth analysis through a thorough analysis of its historical, political, and social particularities.

In this chapter I aim to bring the two cases together for two purposes. First, I argue that these cases present a spectrum of Islamic feminist practices through an examination of how they engage, negotiate, debate, or occupy certain positions towards the language and politics of representation, love, and location. Second, I analyse how ideas presented in writings are constructed within a discourse of intersectional positions rather than being representations of a certain collective group lumped together under categories such as ‘Saudi women’ or ‘Algerian women’. In doing so, I provide more evidence and examples to further solidify my arguments in the previous two chapters about Islamic feminisms and how women relate to religion in different ways based on intersecting subjectivities. These two case studies seen side by side for analysis provide a range of illuminating reactions to these themes and highlight where feminist texts and acts produced by Muslim women fall on a spectrum we may call Islamic feminisms.

Comparing two countries as different as Algeria and Saudi Arabia provides surprising results. Comparing different generations provides even more surprises. However, the two memoirs upon which the previous chapters rely were published recently, with Wanisi’s published in 2012, and Al-Sharif’s in 2017. Wanisi’s autobiography features a longer history that goes far back into colonial times, but it was still affected by contemporary events during the phase of writing and remembering.
It is always fascinating to see how women who identify as Muslim and embrace that identity in their writings and activism present their understanding of their Islamic gendered identity and the conditions that led them to write about it. This was the reason behind bringing the two cases together.

In many scholarly works, North African countries are compared to one another (Charrad, 2001; Ennaji, 2016) and Gulf countries are compared to one another (Doumato, 2003) because of their geographical and cultural proximity. Countries are often lumped together under such collective signifiers as “Middle East and North African” or MENA countries. However, drawing comparisons between two countries that have heretofore not been previously compared opens new opportunities to understand how women from different historical and geographical realities understand Islam and not only reclaim Islamic identity but also negotiate it despite attempts at patriarchal reclamations of Islam as well as wide-ranging Islamophobia around the world. Investigating how these tensions are affected by intersecting factors not only helps to point out the uniqueness of each situation, but also the diversity of thought and experience amongst Muslim women. This comparative analysis might serve as a response to the claim that pursuing this identity reduces women to their religious experience. In this analysis, women themselves present their narratives to explain how that identity is part and parcel of who they are and why they refuse to give it up for the sake of modernist narratives that render their faith as source of terrorism, backwardness, or inequality. Further, these narratives from Muslim women refute the notion that Muslim women need to be saved by western hegemonic narratives that legitimate further domination through imperialism (Abu-Lughod, 2008).

Before we analyse the themes mentioned above, it is necessary to highlight some relevant points regarding the history of the two states and the positionality of the researcher. Though Saudi Arabia did not experienced colonialism in a material way, western colonial power impacted the political situation at the time of state formation in the early 20th century. Presently, other forms of neocoloniality prevails around the region and continues to affect Saudi Arabia’s politics. Algeria experienced settler colonialism with lasting cultural impacts. The formal end of colonialism did not
mean that Algeria is now in a truly postcolonial condition. Culturally, decolonisation seems to be an ongoing project. Both countries have also experienced what is often referred to as ‘Islamic awakening’. Both have suffered from terrorist attacks at the hands of those returning from the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. However, Algeria also went through a short democratic experience and destructive civil war. The riots that erupted during what is called the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 somehow mirrored Algeria’s experience years before in 1988, when uprisings led to a short period of political and media openness but unfortunately also led to a civil war between the state and Islamists and massacres of innocent people. Saudi Arabia experienced heightened political openness in the late 1990s after the Kingdom joined the global free market economy with new business opportunities and an opening of new forms media (Al-Rasheed, 2015).

However, because of the 1990 Gulf War, 9/11, and the ‘War on Terror’, the ‘Islamic Awakening’, or sahwa, began to be questioned by Saudi leaders. Likewise, the Islamists’ popularity in Algeria receded after the Black Decade of civil war.

It should be noted that in both Algeria and Saudi Arabia we find voices that deny the existence of feminism which is part of the debate over whether Islamic feminism exists. These critics argue that there are feminists in the Arab world but not yet feminism. This is manifested in the publication of such articles such as, “Does Saudi Feminism Exist?” (Al-Fassi, 2006), which tries to prove that it does. Many female Algerian academics I contacted insist that there is no feminism in Algeria as it is understood in Egypt or Lebanon (Seddik, personal correspondence, 2017).

It is also important to highlight my positionality within this research. As a Saudi Muslim woman who was raised in Saudi Arabia during the same time period covered by Al-Sharif’s narrative (1980s-present) and who witnessed her driving campaign and its impact on society, I occupy the position of an insider. I identify with some experiences Al-Sharif mentions, such as being educated in a public governmental school, and know some of the places and details she narrates. However, sharing the same country of origin does not mean that hers was an easy case to study because of our different backgrounds and experiences which complicate my study of her
autobiography. First, her experience of being the daughter of a Libyan mother and a Saudi father makes her experiences different from my own. I also do not identify with practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) which I did not know existed in Saudi Arabia prior to reading her book, demonstrating that no matter how much one is considered an insider, one’s access to another’s reality is always partial. Al-Sharif also faced racist remarks as the daughter of a non-Saudi mother by her ex-husband and cousins. I understand these experiences from the perspective of a witness but cannot claim that I knew exactly how it feels, having not been the target of racist comments and actions until I lived outside Saudi Arabia and faced these for wearing my veil, being called a ‘terrorist’.

I also received the same education as Al-Sharif in the same governmental public schools. However, though I live 45 minutes from Makkah—where Al-Sharif was raised—it was a surprise for me to read about the grim neighbourhood in which she used to live. She provides firsthand narratives of working-class experiences and plights. This differs significantly from previously published novels by young Saudi women like Girls of Riyadh which focuses on the celebrities and the upper-class of Saudi society. The insider position in Al-Sharif’s work was not always a privilege I enjoyed but it helped me understand how her experiences and lived realities were situated. Spivak observes: “No one can quite articulate the space she herself inhabits. […] it’s the thing that seems to be most problematic, and something that one really learns from other people” (1990, pg. 68).

Reading Wanisi was likewise not an easy endeavour. As an outsider to the Algerian context, I had to educate myself before selecting Wanisi29 as my case study. I began by studying whether Islamic feminism exists in Algeria, and if so, what does it look like? I find it hard to explain my position regarding the existence or importance of religion in a feminist framework in Algeria for performing this research or while discussing the idea with other specialists in Algerian contexts. I did not choose my cases for their tokenism, but because of their long engagement with a particular

29 I was introduced to Wanisi and her writings through email correspondence with Dr. Natalya Vince, author of Our Fighter Sisters (2015).
kind of religious experience through education and later through reflection on that experience in writing. I was also drawn to their experiences of social inequalities. However, are they representative of Algerian or Saudi women?

My motivating question in this research has been whether Islamic feminism is practiced in Saudi Arabia and Algeria. To answer this question, I now turn to postcolonial feminism and Third World critical, theoretical endeavours to truly understand and engage the theme of representation and difference. I think Islamic feminists would benefit greatly from debates on difference, representation, relationality, localization, and contextualisation of women’s experiences and struggles conducted by postcolonial feminism. To establish a connection between Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism (or what I will interchangeably refer to as Third World/Transnational Feminism) is important as Islamic feminisms are not only theocentric but intersectional and complex. Feminist postcolonial theory is helpful to address the question of representation and ask how the featured works engage with issues of representation. One of the central theoretical endeavours by postcolonial feminists regarding representation is the work of Spivak on the Subaltern. The questions of focus on speaking as well as reception, and include: ‘Who can speak and for whom’? ‘Who listens’? ‘How does one represent the self and others’? (Bahri, 2004) and are integral to postcolonial feminists.

THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

The questions above, inspired by Spivak’s studies on the Subaltern, are important because they arouse heated debates around issues of authenticity, essentialism, representation, positionality, and location. They also portray the complexity of the relationship between first-world feminists/academia as the source of intellectual inquiry, and third-world wo/men as the object of study and scrutiny. Once the speaking takes place, other processes follow of reception or listening and reading, or (mis)interpretation and (mis)reading. For Spivak, misreading is mostly the case, and posits that even if one claims to speak for women it does not necessarily mean that one represents the truly marginalised or silenced.
Who is Speaking?

Feminism, Spivak contends, produced a hegemonic discourse that tends to other third world women (Bahri, 2004, pg. 205). I would argue that a similar process happens within a specific context when a predetermined kind of feminism is produced or imposed on that context. Those who aspire to the ready-made Western model will be moving within a subjectivity that imagines itself neutral and ‘an individualist feminist self against others’ (Bahri, 2004, pg. 205). One sees this very clearly in the feminist historiography of both Algeria and Saudi Arabia. For example, Al-Fassi (2016), a Saudi feminist, describes feminists such as herself as enlightened and describes women who reject feminist ideals or do not share the same understanding of women’s emancipation as the ‘Others’. Cherifati-Merabtine (1994) also divides the women’s movement in Algeria into two camps: the modernists, including herself, and the ‘other’ women who follow the Islamic current, as I mentioned in Chapter 2.

Edward Said questions the whole process of representation whether for the self or the Other because both of these types might be misinterpreted as “representative of an entire culture” (Bahri, 2004, pg. 206). Said’s position exposes the entanglement of the real and the representative which is also difficult to dismantle from any representation. Wanisi makes the disclaimer early on in her memoir that she ‘only lives her life’ and her story is her own reality only and should not be read as historical record. However, she is thought of as an elite writer affiliated with the state and therefore not representative of Algerian women as a whole because she represents a unitary subject position of what constitutes Algerianness that denies its multiculturalism.

In the same vein, Al-Sharif’s memoir should be treated as her own story. However, she sometimes falls into the trap of presenting clichés about Saudi women in a sarcastic tone that implies the backwardness and illogicality of behaviours for her but which for others are meaningful parts of their realities, such as gender segregation. Another example is when she claims that her whole generation, speaking of those who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, was ‘brainwashed’ with extremist discourse in schools and media (2017, pg. 143). The idea of presenting a whole generation
as brainwashed is hyperbolic to say the least. Speaking as a representative of the generation of the 1980s is problematic. Spivak explains

the question of ‘speaking as’ involves a distancing from oneself. The moment I have to think of the ways in which I will speak as an Indian, or as a feminist, the ways in which I will speak as a woman, what I am doing is trying to generalize myself, making myself a representative, trying to distance myself from some kind of inchoate speaking as such. There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing (1990, pg. 60)

For Spivak, ‘othering’ is embedded in the practice of representation. When Al-Sharif speaks as a representative of the whole generation she falls in the contradiction of homogenisation and essentialism. At the same time, she has to distance herself from that generation to be able to critique and present it. The subtitle of the book, ‘a Saudi woman’s awakening’, highlights the process of ‘othering’ her generation and other Saudi women to present both her exceptionalism and being a representative. She is, for a moment, distancing herself from her own experiences that might also contribute to her radicalism. Using Al-Sharif’s own narrative, one begins to see that radicalisation might have been a result of reasons other than education: the physical and psychological abuse she endured, which itself has nothing to do with religion (as she states); also poverty, social inequality and marginalisation, and her mother’s mental health. We see through her narrative that every feminist move carries a risk and what is most fascinating as a researcher are the contradictions and paradoxes that create tension with Al-Sharif’s deep religious conviction. It is also important to highlight when and how power enters into the process of ‘cross-cultural’ representation, especially as in Al-Sharif’s case by choosing to publish her book in the West.

Who is Hearing and Listening?

Al-Sharif published her memoir in English as part of a collaborative effort with Lyric Winik, and as a politically strategic choice. Though Al-Sharif used the internet as a platform to raise women’s issues, she is keen to access a Western readership by writing in English on social media platforms and publishing her book. English language has become an empire in and of itself that Phillipson (1992) argues outlived the British empire. In this frame, we live in age of linguistic imperialism which creates a hegemony that ‘serves to support foreign policy objectives, economic
domination, and other features of a contemporary globalisation that is little more than an extension of earlier international inequalities’ (Huddart, 2014, pg. 38). This is all done through a process of normalisation through which linguistic violence is internalized and accepted (Huddart, 2014). English has become integral for global communication. It is even mandatory in international workplaces in a gesture that combines linguistic and capitalist hegemony. It is the language of work in economic institutions in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states (Clark, 2000). Indeed, it was as an Aramco employee that Al-Sharif struggled to learn English in order to excel in her career:

My work was challenging, especially after our group leader selected me to manage my first project. I was terrified I’d fail. I had never managed anything before, and the fact that I was both a graduate of a public university and the only woman in our division put even more pressure on me to prove myself. Until then, I had always thought that my English was good, so I was shocked to find myself struggling with reports and emails. Neither my university nor Aramco had trained me in the technical terms I needed to know for work. Even more challenging, English was the official language spoken at Aramco, so I needed it for every meeting as well as for reports and emails. Then Lamia told me about the Aramco English Learning Center. I could study in the morning, she said, and return to my office after the lunch break. After taking the placement exam, I was put in the advanced section, which required students to attend half-day classes for six months. But my boss flatly refused to let me leave the office, telling me that I had to improve my English myself. (2017, pg. 229-230)

In this quote it becomes clear how language—as one of the power dynamics or ‘the master’s tools’ at work—works in an international corporation such as Aramco. Al-Sharif understands the place English occupies and she is eager to master it as a tool of empowerment ‘to dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde, 1984). At an earlier point in the narrative where she explains her struggles to find accommodation and transportation after leaving her parents’ house and living nearer to work without support from her employers she writes:

I was lonely, desperate, and angry. At that moment, I truly understood what it meant to be a Saudi woman. It meant being confronted with every possible kind of obstacle and discrimination. It meant being told that if you want to race with men, you’d have to do it with your hands and legs cut off. I started to wish I had been born somewhere—anywhere—else.” (2017a, pg. 220, my emphasis)

English proves to be one of the hands and legs she utilised to gain her upward social and institutional mobility in her work and in global publication in search of solidarity and to get people
to listen to her. Women struggle everywhere at work and this experience is not particular to Saudi society. So ‘somewhere—anywhere else’ is not necessarily a utopia for women. For example, neocapitalist and western retailers exploit poor women’s work in third world countries through microfinance (Karim, 2014). Many women and organisations are still working to close the gender pay gap and many women are fighting sexual harassment in the workplace as seen by the #MeToo movement.

What is surprising is that Al-Sharif brings English home. As she states in her memoir, ‘I have only talked to Aboudi [her son] in English. I struggled for so many years to learn the language that I didn’t want my son to have to do so too’ (2017a, pg. 353). Bringing English home and using it in their personal communication is in a way teaching her son to the power game that she was subjected to at work. This is reminiscent of Algerian writer Assia Djebar’s dilemma in which her bilingual father brought French, a tool in his workplace and of the coloniser, to an Arabic-speaking home by choosing to converse with his daughter in French (Mortimer, 1988). Djebar sometimes felt isolated from her fellow women and the maternal language spoken at home (Mortimer, 1988).

Al-Sharif intended to write her story as a record for her son, but then became keen for the book to be published globally. This desire to represent oneself to the ‘other’ and be read by a global audience through English is shared by many female Saudi writers who came before her such as Raja ‘Alim30 and Raja Al-Sanea’.31 In this sense, English helps create an elitist class, originally emerging from the middle class, and this may detach them from the majority of their country. Al-Rasheed (2015) argues that a group of young cosmopolitan Saudi women novelists whose works are published widely in English are not highly representative of women in Saudi Arabia. Through Al-Sharif’s story we know that Al-Rasheed’s argument is not necessarily accurate in that some young women become cosmopolitan after a process of intentional upward social mobility through

---

31 In the case of Raja Al-Sanea’s Girls of Riyadh (2009) the Saudi author interfered in the translation by Marilyn Booth.
education and hard work, as opposed to being born into economic privilege. This illustrates the messy enterprise of representation.

If language is one of the tools to gain access to representation in global reality, so is telling the right story. There are stories that sell and stories that do not sell. Emily Apter writes:

In the marketing of Third-World difference, what sells? A We-are-the-World or Benetton kind of writer who appeals to sentimental universalism or secularized religious philosophy (‘love one another right now’)? A dissident author? A subcontinental writer who capitalizes on exoticism or one who explores Indian identity? A Pacific Rim writer who reinforces essentialist stereotypes of Asianness, or one who embraces western literary conceits and avantgardes? A traditional African writer or an Afro-futurist? Obviously the choices are largely dependent on the whimsy of fashion and politics, but one thing is clear, though the current ‘world lit’, market is volatile and unpredictable, an identifiable canon that one might call ‘in-translation’ (dominated by PEN and UNESCO writers), crowds out competitors that remain stuck in anonymity. We must ask then, to what extent ‘foreign’ writers of ambition are consciously or unconsciously writing for international markets; building translatability into their textuality. (2013, pg. 100-1)

Al-Sharif tells us that her story was first rejected by a number of publishers. One publisher wanted to know more about her personal life and not only the driving campaign; only when that was added was her sensational story of being an ex-radical worth publishing. After 9/11 especially, and the ‘War on Terror’ that followed, a number of confessional stories proliferated that explored the phenomenon of the ‘Muslim terrorists’ or extremists and gave a firsthand account of those who survived radicalisation by narrating their ways in and out of it. They were interviewed extensively by international media. This is exactly what happened to Al-Sharif. It might not be the driving campaign that draws attention to her story as much as the story of how she evolved from radicalism into activism. Parts of her story that conform to the stereotype of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ might also be another reason.

Publishers exercise great influence over texts. This shows the double standards of neoliberalism/neocapitalism in which individualism is encouraged but one’s agency and choice are subtly controlled once confronted with the rules of consumption and production. Al-Sharif’s story

has been consumed in ways over which she has little control. For example, a commenter named
Reem Al-Khammash left the following, in Arabic, on Al-Sharif’s Facebook page:

Manal I wished you translated the title of your book in Arabic to English. The Arabic title
(Driving for Freedom) is more beautiful than the English title ‘Daring to Drive’ which you
chose (probably the publisher chooses it) and it has negative connotations. One of these is
that your driving is a kind of challenge to society and this is the reason for the attack against
you. However, Driving for Freedom portrays you as I see you seeking social justice and
believing in your rights. The question is— we as Saudi women— move in circles when we
ask: freedom from what? (Al-Khammash, 2017, my translation)

Al-Sharif responded, and her response shows how little control she practiced during the
process of publication:

Hi Reem, the American publisher is the one who chose the title and until this moment I do
not know if the Arabic Publisher will accept my suggested title. Unfortunately, the writer is
the last to choose the title and the cover of his book. (Al-Sharif, 2017b, my translation)

The above does not undermine Al-Sharif’s authenticity. To the contrary, I am against using
her story to reinforce tired clichés and stereotypes about Muslim and Arab women in general and
Saudi women in particular. Al-Sharif sometimes helps in perpetuating these stereotypes when she
provides sweeping generalisations. For example, she said in an interview that, ‘Women are still
being treated as slaves in 2017’ (Tran, 2017). While each Western white woman’s story is
understood as hers alone, autobiographies written by women from Muslim counties or Third World
counties are read as representatives of their culture and the whole nation to which they belong.
Some Saudi women who write their stories are very anxious about how their stories might be used
to serve certain agendas. Maha Noor Elahi, a female Saudi blogger, expresses the uselessness of
such representation to Saudi women and it only serves the interests of publishers who want to sell
these books. She mentioned writing a book called The Biography of a Saudi Fraud which tackles
the question of identity through her experience as a Saudi with Indian origins. She writes this
disclaimer on her blog about the forthcoming book:

Some might think that this book is going to record the life of an oppressed Saudi woman.
Some might think I am another version of Rania Al-Baz calling for help from America’s

33 She is a Saudi TV presenter who faced severe physical abuse by her husband in 2004 and
published her story in French. Western Media and publishers were very keen on publicising her
number one lady, Oprah Winfrey. [Being a woman in Saudi Arabia] is definitely an attractive interesting topic, yet this is not my objective. My primary goal is not to decipher the mysteriousness of the Saudi woman; I will attempt this worn-out task only when it is relevant.

I don’t want to completely undertake such a mission because other writers’ books won’t sell if I do this. Having some level of suspense on is always useful in order to keep the Arabian enigma burning and alive. Arabian women, especially women of the Arabian Gulf area have been viewed by the most narrowing stereotypical vision. The world looks at Arabian Gulf women as either submissive humiliated beings, oppressed lustful females, or modern rebellious women who scorn traditions and rebuff religion altogether. The whole universe of Arabian women is confined to such a partial portrait. As I will explain in this book, the real picture is not the one mentioned above … (Elahi, 2009)

Narratives are defined as ‘discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it’ (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, pg. xvi). This definition of narrative reflects how narratives and discourses more broadly are inherently intertwined with language and ideology in ways that, together, produce meanings. Here, one sees the important role of representation in the perpetuation of ideology through language and discourse (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013). Representation, simply, is the production of meaning through language (Hall et al., 2013, pg. 14). And because language cannot be separated from ideology, ‘representations do the work of ideology’ (Burton, 2010, p. 13). In other words, representation, through language, is the means by which ideologies are produced. The production of meaning does not happen on its own; rather, discursive practices must take place in order to give things meaning and to communicate that meaning to others.

Language itself is a signifying practice (Hall, 1997a). The circulation of meanings raises questions about power—who has the power to circulate such meanings, by what means, and to whom (Hall, 1997a). One sees, then, how representation, power, and ideology are bound up together: the individuals, groups, or institutions that have the power over which representations are circulated are those who are able to construct and perpetuate ideologies for their own benefit and at the expense of others.

story while other Saudi women who are empowered and successful are never the highlight of international media because they deconstruct the stereotype.
For Hall, the intervention of power into language is always about fixing meaning. Stereotypes serve as one such mechanism for this process of fixing meanings that are given to groups—they attempt to limit the range of characteristics that are possible for the depicted group or member of a group (Hall et al., 2012; Dyer 1999, 2002). However, for Hall, despite such intentions, meanings can never be finally fixed. The actual meaning produced by media texts is far from straightforward, reflecting a negotiation between the media producer and reader (Hall, 1997b).

Al-Sharif’s story is consumed as one of the stories in the long history of ‘veiled’ Muslim women as is manifested by the book cover of the English version, in which Al-Sharif is pictured wearing a veil though she has not practiced veiling for many years. While the narrative tells us in detail her relationship to veiling through different stages in her life and which led her to stop the practice of veiling after years of studying and negotiating it, the publisher still insisted upon employing the veil as a signifier (and fixing her in that stereotype) which would raise certain associations and expectations to targeted readers. There is a contradiction between the cover (of her, being veiled) and the story inside (of her unveiling). It is noteworthy that the German version of her book does not use this image of the veil. In her review of the book, which Al-Sharif puts in her blog entitled ‘My Favourite Review of My Memoir,’ Sara Aziz writes:

Books and articles claiming to explain or uncover these so-called realities [about Arab and Muslim women] are always sure to sell well, but most fail to give adequate nuance to the lives and aspirations of the women they describe.

I was, as such, very wary when an advanced copy of Saudi activist Manal al-Sharif’s new book, Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman’s Awakening arrived at my front door. A former resident of Saudi myself, I already knew and respected the story of al-Sharif’s activism but a glance at the cover put me off. The title seemed too strategic. If there is one thing Westerners know about women’s rights in Saudi, it is the so-called ban on female drivers. I expected the book to be a repackaging of this tired narrative marketed to Western audiences whose feelings about Saudi women are already predetermined. The book’s blurbs seemed to confirm this expectation, touting the all-too-familiar promise of a ‘rare glimpse’ into the dark world of Arab women.

Even so, I dutifully cracked open the book. What I found inside challenged my expectations – and, I believe, will also challenge the assumptions Western readers have about Arab and Muslim women. (Aziz, 2017)
However, not everyone will be ready to challenge their ‘predetermined’ views about Arab, Muslim, and/or Saudi women and consume Al-Sharif’s story in unexpected ways. She attended a conference in 2017 in Beverly Hills to tell her story along with a Pakistani and African woman (as she narrates the incident to another American crowd):

After they finish their American hostess ‘stood and said I brought these women to tell you how lucky we are to grow up Americans’. She continued ‘I was ...I was ...I was surprised why this woman brought me here to tell those women they are lucky because I am oppressed. Instead of saying How about we open. We look back. We reflect and see what are the things we need to change here” (ALOUD, June 21, 2017)

The above quote shows how her story was interpreted in unexpected ways from her intended meaning. In the interview (2017), she was asked what Western women could do to help women like her in their struggle. She answered that ‘administration after administration, there was no push or pressure...political pressure...diplomatic pressure to promote more women’s rights’. In another talk she gave in 2018, she revisited that answer without being asked again and called it ‘a whisper to western women’, as if she wanted to correct her previous mistake:

Once I was asked what can western women do to help women like me. My answer was simple: if the question was out of a feeling of being thankful for being a western women, or oh my God those poor oppressed women…us… then my answer is thank you, you have way to go yourself. But if the question come out of genuine interest in our struggle as your sister of this world then yes you can help by never taking your rights for granted. Practice them. Use your voice for the voiceless, the helpless, the most vulnerable women of your society. There are hundreds of them around you in your society. You don’t need to look for women overseas to help them and you inspire when you do that. (Al-Sharif, 2018)

This could explain why one reads under her YouTube videos the oft-repeated comment that she does not represent Saudi women, and why 90% answer ‘yes’ to the poll ‘Do you consider Manal a traitor after her speech in Oslo”? (Al-Sharif , 2013) Saudi people get the message from her speaking in English and addressing Western people that she wants to please the West and seek their help against her own country although she always explains that her activism is inspired by her love of her country and that she is a proud Saudi (Al-Sharif, 2013). Part of this criticism is that people see her demands as serving the interest of women who are already privileged, diverting attention away from real issues that affect more women, such as housing for divorced women (Yousef, 2011).
In a video that Al-Sharif posted on Twitter (3 June 2018) defending the Saudi women activists detained for their driving protest, she said that women like Eman Al-Nafjan, the Saudi blogger who initiated the campaign My Right, My Dignity (2013) was against collaboration with any international organisations, as Al-Sharif puts it: ‘because first they always want something in return and second it will get you in trouble with the government’. Even when asked by CNN about US President Obama’s turning a blind eye to women’s issues in Saudi Arabia, Al-Nafjan replied that the driving issue was indeed ‘internal and should be resolved internally without any interference’. Moreover, in a study conducted analysing Al-Nafjan’s blog (Saudiwoman’s weblog), Tschirhart (2014) finds that she was cautious when Western women ask to engage in her activism.

However, Al-Sharif follows a different trajectory. She in fact seems to support seeking solidarity from the international community. Asked frequently about who should be credited for lifting the driving ban, she argues that it is the activists who triggered the international community’s attention to it. She also launched the campaign #Miles4Freedom in which she asked for the solidarity of women everywhere to free those women who were detained on 19 May 2018. She also tweeted mostly in English after their arrest. Al-Sharif has chosen to write in English whether on Twitter or in her memoir: this choice was always strategic and with an intended global audience. Al-Sharif herself has been caught up in the profound complexity of trying to maintain her faith-based work, mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, while at the same time attracting attention to certain issues through her choice of language and debates. This produces an ambivalent reception of those choices and debates.

**Speaking Inward**

In contrast, Zuhur Wanisi is aware of how being perceived as an insider or outsider might affect her writing and positionality for her intended Algerian audience. When her house was attacked in the riots of 1988, Wanisi chose her exile to be inside of her country, calling it an ‘immigration into the South’ (2012, pg. 434). She criticised other members of the ruling party at the time who abandoned their country and emigrated to the north, which she interprets as an unpatriotic
act. Wanisi has strongly rejected any Western influence on her country and she also rejects living outside Algeria, even for studying. She has been critical of some writers who seek fame outside Algeria. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Wanisi was among the faction who proposed making Arabic the national language and was among the social forces pushing for Arabisation after independence, though she was also in support of acknowledging the Berber language as a national language and faced attacks for this position (2012, pg. 388-389). However, she was against using French because it was the coloniser’s language.

On many occasions Wanisi mentioned the struggles between writers or institutions who write in French and Arabic in postcolonial Algeria, like in the first Algerian Writer Unions in the 1960s just after independence. It was under her administration as Minister of National Education and with the will of the President that the French lyceé Descartes High School moved to another neighbourhood because it was a highly selective school, giving education in French and targeting the wealthy, who after graduation often pursued their higher education abroad. She criticises those who were not supportive of the Algerian school system after independence and did not trust the national, Arabised curriculum. She taught her own son in the Arabised school.

While Wanisi insists on using Arabic, she also learned French to gain access to Algerians of her generation. She wrote about her feelings of being proud learning it as a ‘foreign’ language and not imposed as the dominant language of the coloniser. So, Arabic was more than a language for her; it was an ethnicity, authenticity, nationality, and identity all at once. Arabisation was a revival project to reconnect with one's roots in the newly independent Algeria and a responsibility to transmit it to next generation; it was a mission to bring Arabic to every Algerian home.

Her dilemma to have a language independent from the colonised language was shared by many intellectuals from all the newly independent states in Africa, like Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who abandoned using English for the sake of his native Gikuyu (Talib, 2002). It was an integral part of the creation of the modern Algerian nation and developing a national education to achieve the complete decolonisation of Algeria. Wanisi’s rejection of the French language signified a rejection
of all forms of domination of past colonialism after independence was gained. She embraced Arabic, which had previously been relegated to the private spaces of homes, bringing it back to the centre (though the Arabic Dārja at home was different from the one taught at school). In an interview with Al-Jazeera, Wanisi said:

the Algerian human was deprived from learning his language, performing his religious rituals, and even of learning his history, his cultural heritage, his roots whether Arabic or Islamic, and for the Amezigh, they were deprived of everything. One of the colonisation’s aims was to uproot them and made a new society. We don’t forget that everything, every Arabic letter was forbidden before the revolution. All things that were reserved including the Arabic language, traditions, and cultural heritage was a kind of resistance and a kind of challenge on behalf of the Algerian society. We don’t forget that the French colonialism was settlement colony that wants to replace one society with another.

So Wanisi was against the continued linguistic dominance of French in her country (which as the above quote shows means two things: uprooting and replacement) and aimed to erode the traces of that colonialism. This proved to be a complicated process as French remains the lingua franca for many Algerians even today, and Berber-speaking people also resist the process of Arabisation. This ideological war over language divided the indigenous people of Algeria against themselves and contributed in a way to a class and racial divide created by the colonial enterprise. An intellectual class was also created defending what should constitute the ‘national language’.

Wanisi very enthusiastically guards what she believes is an ‘authentic’ relationship to her identity—Islamic, Arab, and Algerian nationalism—as a kind of commitment and loyalty to the people who died during the revolution, ‘to restore its national history and identity’ (2012, pg. 412). However, the narrative that connects the deaths of the revolutionaries to the demand for the immediate death of French as a language in Algeria did not seem effective even when used in the founding text of the Algerian revolution34 where, “It is clear that this text used ideologically as a political tool to unite and mobilise people for the revolution” (Saadi-Mocrani, 2002, pg. 47).

34 Algerian culture must be Arabized to fight against ‘the cultural cosmopolitanism and pervasive Westernization which has contributed to teaching many Algerians to disdain their national language and values’ (pg. 47, cited in Saadi-Mokrani) The Algerian Linguicide
Language, then, has been used in an ideological war and power game between Arabophone, Francophone, and Berberphone in Algeria since the colonial period and has continued into the postcolonial period. This problematises the issue of representation because the Arabic used in the media and schools was not the Arabic Dāرja people use in their daily communication; it was a “literary” Arabic and people who did not attend the Arabised school find it hard to understand the speeches given by their political leaders or in some programmes on TV in the post independent times (Saadi-Mokrane, 2002; Berger, 2002). Algerians themselves refer to it as ‘classical Arabic’ or ‘literary Arabic’ or ‘oriental Arabic’. According to Berger (2002), ‘These terms all imply a distance, whether cultural or geographical, from the familiar language. It is another Arabic, if not the Arabic of the Other’ (pg. 66). Therefore, Wanisi’s presentation of Arabic as the national language is challenged by other writers and by other dynamic processes in society.

The ‘linguicide’ that was practiced by the French ‘to subjugate and to reshape the identity of the country and its inhabitants by separating them from their points of reference’ — according to Saadi-Mokrane (2002, pg. 44) — was also practiced through the ‘literary’ Arabic used in the Arabisation in schools that unintentionally targeted dialectical Arabic and Berber, while intentionally targeting French. They both were processes of acculturation; language was never neutral. As Saadi-Makrane (2000) puts it:

Fantacised deaths and aborted oral devices, trace macabre patterns of linguistic suffering; a will to omnipotence endeavors to penetrate the intimacy of the ineffable human being and to remake the ontological character of the people of Algeria. To use a brutal metaphor, the leaders of Algeria would like to linguistically castrate the people, and, to do this, have used the resources of the state to recreate the lost image of the Orient. In this context, it is clear that no linguistic usage can be neutral, nor can it be a simple tool for communication.

So, the Arabisation was not representative of all people in Algeria and does not adequately address its linguistic diversity. As Saad-Makrani puts it, ‘Arabization is not Algerianization—far from it’ (pg. 52). It is the denial of others and a ‘manufactured split that made [people] foreign to itself’ (2000, pg. 55). However, Arabic was imagined to be the answer to deconstructing the whole
racist and classist system created by French language and education. Similar debates about abolishing the master’s language and Africanising the curriculum were debated among African writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1972), who resist English as holding a racist ideology and argue that to continue using it is to inscribe that racism on oneself and be complicit in maintaining the colonial order. Similarly, this may explain why some Algerians so fiercely resist the dominance of French. Language was used to create the racist structure of colonialism in Algeria and to continue using it was for some an act of complicity in maintaining that colonisation of the Algerian mind and knowledge through the power of language. Language, as postcolonial theory teaches, is at the heart of power dynamics. But power and dominance are relative (Talib, 2006). As Arabic dominated the Arabisation process after independence, it was challenged by other national languages such as Berber or Arabic Dārja and even French. Arabic moved into the central and sole position of being the national language with all the political, cultural, historical, ethnic associations it entails. However, Arabic dominance in the aftermath of colonialism was only relative; Berber and even French occupied other places of dominance now. French did not disappear or become marginal. On the contrary, the number of users increased for a number of factors. It continues to be used by elites today who use it as:

the language of economic, scientific, and technical power. It is still taught as a foreign language from the fourth year of elementary school through the last year of high school. In high school, it is used in the sciences and in technology studies. In the social sciences, French is also used in graduate study. In all disciplines, it provides access to the literature, which is in French for the most part. Algerian emigrés live in France, and contribute to the influence of French via familial and economic relations with their native country, and French television channels, which are much watched throughout the country. Book publishers and the press distribute many French titles.” (Saadi-Makrane 2002, pg. 52-53).

Wanisi was not against teaching French as a second language in Algeria and she strongly supported acknowledging Berber as a national language, but she always considered Arabic and Islam as the ceiling of the house for which the forefathers fought (Wanisi, 2012, pg. 414). The discrepancy between official narratives that feature Arabic as the national language and the evolution of other languages in the culture shows that representation will always be partial and
fictional ‘because it must imaginatively construct its constituency as a portrait or a fiction’ (Bahri, 2004, pg. 206). So, one can contrast Wanisi’s use of Arabic, imagined as a ceiling for the Algerian house, as resistance to French linguistic dominance in postcolonial Algeria and her attempts to transmit that to the next generation through education and media with Al-Sharif’s adaptation of English as globalised by imperialist hegemony and bringing it home in choosing it as language for conversation between her and her son. Wanisi’s position contradicts the multilingualism of Algeria and denies the Other and as some interpret it is opposed to true Algerianness. Al-Sharif’s use of English has ambivalent results; while it gives her access to global community and international solidarity, it is often misread as seeking the

West’s interference.

**LOVE IS NOT FOR LOVE’S SAKE**

Another contrasting position or theme that deserves analysis is the idea of marriage presented in the writing of both writers. In a surprising contrast, Al-Sharif wrote an article called *tazawwajī barāzīlī* ‘Marry a Brazilian’ (2012) while Wanisi wrote an article in 1966, 4 years after independence, and presented a paper during an Islamic Conference (1972) that argued against mixed marriages. Both papers were controversial within their respective communities.

Al-Sharif’s article entitled ‘Marry a Brazilian’ (2012) was a response to a book written by famous female Saudi writer Badriyyah Al-Bishr under the titles *Tazawwj Saʿūdiyya* ‘Marry a Saudi Woman’ (2014) and an article *Lā Tatazawwajī Saʿūdy* ‘Don’t Marry a Saudi Man’(2004). In a sarcastic tone, Al-Bishr criticised the Saudi woman’s situation in marriage, custody, and divorce cases due to the lack of personal status law in Saudi Arabia and advised Saudi women to avoid marrying Saudi men because they will always be the master in cases of disputes. Because she did not propose an alternative for Saudi women, Al-Sharif proposed a Brazilian because a Brazilian colleague was going through a divorce. She compared the two processes of divorce, such as how it does not cost the Saudi man anything and he could even divorce his wife without her presence. She
tells the reader that someone she knows was divorced via a mobile message—her memoir later revealed that she was that woman. Later, that same Brazilian man she mentioned in her article fell in love with her and she married him, and they had a son. She was not able to marry him legally in Saudi Arabia, even when he converted to Islam, nor could they marry in Dubai.

In an epilogue to her memoir she updates the reader that she got divorced from her Brazilian husband because she did not love him the way he loved her though he was very supportive of her. Al-Sharif shares with the reader the intimate romance of her previous husband before marriage though love before marriage is a taboo in Saudi Arabia and other Islamic societies as well. She claims to know what love is and wrote that she did not experience it with her Brazilian husband. She wrote that she married him because she followed the Arabic proverb saying, ‘marry who loves you and don’t marry the one you love’. Because she married the man she loved, and he turned out to be abusive, she went with advice. If one believes the proverb, it is ironic that a woman of her education and courage seems to lose direction when it comes to such an important decision as marriage. Love and marriage seem to be topics of great interest to a number of Saudi bloggers because they are so related to gender relations. Hala Al-Dossari contemplates in a blog post entitled ‘On Love’ (2010):

Qur’an lists friendliness and compassion as the basic feelings secured by marriage, not love. Love is mentioned as a spiritual feeling between believers and God. It is then represented as a higher spiritual feeling than marital feelings. Fair enough, as most marriages can attest to that fact.

Growing up among novels where love is the ideal relationship & the norms between men and women, I used to have a hard time convincing myself that an arranged marriage is the door to love, the risk of losing the chance of love by taking an eternal decision of marriage was intimidated. I was surrounded mostly by unfortunate women, they were maneuvering their way in marriage to keep it together for their children, if there were love at times, it was mostly imagined… I can’t also ignore the high number of divorcees around me, actual or pseudo ones…

Translating the word ‘mawadda’ in the Qur'an as ‘friendless' is not accurate as it has more than fifty meanings in the Arabic dictionary, but one of the obvious meanings is love. However, Al-Dossari highlights an important dilemma in juxtaposing love stories in fiction with the imagined
love she sees in real life. It also manifests the discrepancy between the ideal marital relationship in the Qur’an and Muslim families’ realities on one hand and the romanticised representation of love produced in literature and the complexity of human relationships in real life on the other.

Blogger and poet Maha Noor Elahi wrote a poem inspired, as she states, by an Iraqi woman killed because she loved an American and thus participated in the ongoing debate around love and (mixed) marriage using the theme of saving Arab women from Arab men.

Her so-called man
Has manhood abandoned
And turned into a warden;
A double-faced libertine
Who wraps his woman with a cloak And
Dismantles his mistress in a poem!

Now…ironically
After wavy sands of disrespect,
Sadly…elusively
Her refuge is found…in the West. To
that pale outsider she’s in awe;
Seeking love in the cold….
Impersonally….
Writing a letter of farewell… a confession of defeat:
“Alas, my brother…my father…my lover…
I’ve given in…to a stranger…
My being is a gift to my savior.” (2015, Alas My Lover)

In the first stanza of the poem she criticised the Arab man and especially what she refers to as the ‘libertine’ and their hypocritical treatment of the female body. He doesn’t practice what he writes about in his real life. She blames the men for becoming just wardens of women’s appearances and not practicing ‘real manhood’ which is more than watching over women’s behaviour. Distortions of masculinity and femininity through neoliberal ideals lead to crisis in gender relations and roles in the Arab world.

The above quotes all invite a rethinking of the power dynamics between genders in the Arab context and how intentionally or unintentionally the discussion sometimes leads to the direction of ‘the white man saviour mission’. These discussions invite us to connect to a wider context of first world-third world relations especially in Al-Sharif’s article. Her position of finding a solution to
Saudi women’s problems during divorce procedures in the Brazilian divorce system is very problematic. What is also problematic is Al-Sharif’s suggestion which subverts or deconstructs the local family instead of reforming it, leading to women’s empowerment.

Elahi’s poem captures this cleverly which can be attributed to her knowledge of feminist thought. On her blog, A Saudivan’s Voice, and in more than one article she defies the stereotypical representation of Saudi women as fodder for media and books that want to sell exotic stereotypes. But she also acknowledges that there are many things that need to change in Saudi Arabia. However, she stresses, ‘If change should happen in Saudi Arabia, it should happen by Saudi hands ONLY! The American “savior attitude” doesn’t really convince me because of America’s black history with many countries such as Vietnam and Japan’.

Wanisi, on the other hand, condemns and insists on prohibiting mixed-marriages in Algeria. She first wrote about it in 1966 in the Army Magazine and was translated by the Archbishop of Algiers into French and published in Le Monde. She was asked to discuss the subject again during one of the Islamic Conferences in 1972 on orders from Algerian President Boumédiène himself; this time using more information from Mouloud Gasim, head of Algeria’s religious affairs, to talk about the impact of mixed-marriages on society. As a response, she was described by a feminist married to a Frenchman as holding the blackest hatred in her heart (‘La haine la plus noire’) and describing Wanisi and Gasim as backwards. Contemplating her position while writing her memoir, she remains convinced of her argument and insists that her position stems from her nationalist and historical struggles to discuss such sensitive issues that concern national, societal, and cultural safety [security]. She sees criticism as an attempt to silence her under banners of individual freedom, objectivity, backwardness, and globalisation imposed on her society, while those criticising her in the West impose their own rules that limit individual freedoms in their societies (2012).

Her position does indeed reflect a nationalist concern. Article 17 of the Algerian constitution reads, ‘The family, the basic unit of society, is placed under the protection of the state’, and Article 4 states ‘Islam is the religion of the State’. This gives the state legitimacy as protector of family and
Muslim values. Islam, the problems of the family, and the education of the next generation were major themes discussed during the fifth Islamic Conference in 1971 in Algeria (Seddik, 2008) and the Family Code was a topic for debates for years (Salhi, 2010). Being alarmed by this practice, which was not widespread, shows that ‘there were young men and women with little interest in defending “Arabo-Islamic” culture through endogenous unions’ (Vince, 2015, pg. 153). However, it can also be read in the context of colonialism. Speaking of the colonial period, Wanisi contemplates during the first meeting of Algerian president with his French counterpart:

Is Forgetting possible? Is forgiving possible? Even if we are victorious? Is it possible to turn a new page without psychological, social, economic and intellectual traces?

Why nations are colonised? It is the most shameful act [event] in the history of humanity. Human feelings seem strange and ambiguous especially the ones that created inside us, the generation of the revolution, because of the injustice, oppression, or even bypassing insults [by the coloniser]. With the recurrences of these incidents, they change into anger and hatred growing inside our hearts and feelings and become grounded as the Roman pillars, doesn't wear with time’. (2012, pg. 396-397, my translation)

She highlights that the memory of the colonial period still vivid in the minds of her generation, especially the revolution. The sights of tombs of martyrs with the list of their names found everywhere in Algeria is also a constant reminder. Public space is used to display this memory as well as evoking certain traumatic emotions and affect. This also sheds light on the way that women participated in the politics of remembering. Wanisi clearly links colonialism to mixed-marriage and especially to Algerian women marrying ‘foreigners who are their enemies and the enemies of all the Arab nations’ (as cited in Vince, 2015, pg. 153).

Through the above excerpts by Wanisi, Al-Sharif, and other Saudi bloggers, it can be argued— following Hemmings (2005)— that affect cannot be understood outside social meaning. Hemmings (2005) also explains how emotions travel not only across gender but also across cultures and generations. Hemmings (2005) argues that ‘affect does not circulate freely but tends to travel along already defined lines of cultural investment. Certain (gendered, raced, sexed) subjects accordingly become the objects of others’ affective responses’ (as cited by Pedwell & Whitehead, 2015).
2015, pg. 124). Sara Ahmed (2004) also argues that emotions are neither in nor outside the person but culturally practiced and have political implications. Therefore, it can potentially be used to ‘Other’.

Affect has been important to feminist and postcolonial studies. Feelings were used to understand how oppression is maintained through emotions. It is also used to create solidarity and resistance to structural discrimination. Wanisi’s proposal against mixed marriages can be understood in this context of the colonial past and the feelings and affect which she also wants to keep alive and not forget.

Both Wanisi and Al-Sharif explore how gendered relationships work within their culture, which was intensified or becomes clearer as both are ‘the first’ to occupy positions and spaces that were exclusively male. Al-Sharif noticed a sense of patronage that some Saudi men practiced towards any Saudi woman even if she was not one of his relatives. She writes:

Every bit as challenging as the actual work were the personal relationships around the office. I was still uneasy about—even fearful of—mixing with Saudi men. The only two male colleagues I didn’t deliberately avoid during break times were Albert, from South Africa, and John, from New Zealand, and even then, one of my male Saudi colleagues would ask me, “What do you hope to gain by associating with these infidels?” after he watched us drinking coffee together. (2017a, pg. 229)

Wanisi was chosen by the leaders of the revolution during the war of liberation to be responsible for her cell after the male leader was arrested by the French. She received the order in a letter and was terrified. She showed the letter to another male colleague who told her:

“Madam, it is true that you are the teacher of our children but, excuse me, I can’t work under your leadership.”

I said with surprise and fear: “because I am a woman?”

He replied turning his face away from me: “Yes, because you are a woman, and weak.” (2012, pg. 173, my translation)
Both writers tell of their experiences with divorce. Al-Sharif tells of her feelings upon hearing that she was divorced by her ex-husband via a mobile message while she was attending a conference:

Although I wanted this divorce, when I read that message I felt as though part of my soul had been extinguished. My eyes filled with tears and I left my seat. Standing outside, I called my best friend, Manal. When she answered, the only sounds she heard were my sobs. “I wanted this, but why does it hurt this much?” I choked out into the phone.

“Because the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, said divorce is the woman breaker,” Manal replied. She started crying with me [...] For the entire lunch, I chatted with Aramco’s CEO, and also with the Saudi leader responsible for the country’s ICT infrastructure and regulations, and with the technology adviser to the US president. I wondered if this was a sign that I was right to choose a promising career rather than a failing marriage. (2017, pg. 219)

Wanisi’s divorce was also a turning point in her life. She contemplates, ‘its impact always made me think about women’s issues and situation in my country and other countries and how she is the one who pays for all the mistakes, sins and ignorance and all the complexes’ (2012, pg. 227). Defending the Arab man after her second marriage which lasted happily for five decades she writes, ‘who said that every Arab man is selfish and against women’s rights and successes’? (2012, pg. 231). She attributed every success to her husband’s love and support. However, when she was asked to be the first female minister she was not sure of what her husband’s reaction might be, ‘being an Arab’. This shows how women especially in the Arab world need the support of male members of their families if they are to succeed.

Al-Sharif acknowledges the support of her brother during her driving campaign and how it was crucial for her that he stood by her side, especially when she was arrested. She writes about him being questioned in the police station:

Turning to question my brother, he asked, “Did you give her the keys?”

“Yes, I did,” my brother answered calmly. “I am fine with her driving.”

“Are you for women driving?”
My brother was no longer just my brother at that moment, he was my friend and my ally. He told the colonel that as a petroleum geoscientist, he is often stationed in remote locations for weeks or longer, far away from his family. Because his wife can’t drive, she’s stranded. They don’t have a driver and he doesn’t trust a stranger around his pretty young wife and child. His car sits parked outside his home, worthless. Once, his wife got very sick and suffered for days until he returned.

“So, yes,” my brother answered, ‘I totally support women driving in this country.” (2017a, pg. 331)

It is noteworthy to see how the context shapes experience in both of these cases. Seeking to dismantle all perceived structures of injustice risks destroying important familial networks and units and the strong feeling that unites these. The delicate balance is felt in attempting to effect change whilst maintaining crucial affective relations. Thus, the brother and the husband retain their crucial roles as allies as well as loved ones who provide emotional and intimate support.

AL-SHARIF’S WALLS AND WANISI’S BRIDGES: CONNECTING LANGUAGE AND PLACE TO GENDER POLITICS

In the first chapter of her memoir, Wanisi writes:
In this city of bridges that connect its parts. When you walk around, you would see the dignified [equal] life suspended like its bridges. Girls under ten years old becomes project of [prepared to be married] women. They have no right to go out of the house or learn or play like children. At this age [ten], they should start learning women’s work: cooking, sewing and beautifying and others. The dream should grow by the man, with the man alone. Any other dream is forbidden, it is a profane dream, until the man of your dream become the need of all needs whatever his personality, he is the saviour knight and in him is all the goals of the present and the future. (2012, pg. 21)

She continues:

the women in my city are veiled in black from head to toe […] They said it was a Turkish custom not related to Islam and others say that the black cloak stands for sadness over the death of a righteous Bey. It is also said that it is black because it stands for the victory of Fatmidi doctrine where the city is considered as the source of this sect […] And both positions were portrayed as if they were women’s choice while in fact it is imposed on the women. She did not choose neither the colour nor it symbols but she was made to adopt and work on it like many other social positions. (2012, pg. 22)

In the first quote, Wanisi connects gender politics with places and times in her attempt to understand how and why they work as such in the present. She concludes that women were used to manifest patriarchal assumptions and as bearers of tradition. However, Wanisi sometimes believes

35 Constantine, where she grew up, is famous for its bridges.
in tradition and not breaking those bridges completely. For example, she confessed that when she became a minister, she acted like a she-lion outside the house, but as a domesticated cat once inside the house. This shows how she was eager to perform expected gender roles which was a norm of her generation. Wanisi’s empowerment and independence at an early age did not prevent her from feeling social pressures since her first mission in life as a teacher at 18. She writes:

the social and psychological situation impose on the little teacher a strict way of life: in how to speak, behave, walk and move. To live an age not her own and to be a rational woman from the beginning. She does not laugh as others without care, does not cry without care, and does not dream without caring. She found herself exhaust herself without rebellion, without complaining. (2012, pg. 149)

She continued this self-regulation of behaviour and dress when she became the first female minister because people were watching and judging her as a woman. One can read her own commitment to the norms and expectations as a form of resistance in itself because as she imagined her success and conformity to people’s expectations (by not challenging or disappointing them) would open more public space for women after her.

Wanisi’s position toward gender reminds us of the critique to liberal feminism offered by the political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain who opposes liberal feminists’ ideas that individual rights are more urgent than common good, and that choice is more urgent than commitment. Wanisi’s position also seems very much like Elshtain in her critique of equating being male with being human and of elevating male values. Wanisi criticises the oft-repeated phrase in Arabic which praises women by saying ‘This woman is like a man’. Wanisi writes, ‘as if manliness is the human perfection. I have never tolerated the abolition of my gender while I am doing my job and, thank Allah, I achieved significant achievement’ (2012, pg. 360). She advocates for men and women’s equality within the family as unity where men and women both have commitments and responsibilities. However, it is on the linguistic level that Wanisi attempts to find her own gender theorisation framed by Islam and Arabic language. She writes:

I want to be myself just as Allah created me with my strengths and weaknesses. A human being seeking [moral] perfection […] What I want is to gain man’s respect as I respect him, protect my rights as I protect his rights, respect me as a woman, yes, but as a woman with a
mind exactly as I respect him as a human ['imrī' = man] with a mind. Virility [murū'ah] must be the common denominator between us and not masculinity or femininity (2012, pg. 318)

This quote sums up her own theory of gender relations and roles which acknowledges the difference between the sexes but proposes a common denominator that—while it does not gloss over other’s differences—respects the other’s weaknesses and strengths because human beings are not only bodies but minds and souls. Using Murū’a as that common denominator is noteworthy; she does not use words like equality, equity, or even complementarity; she neither chooses men (rijāl) nor women (nisā’) to signify gender, but finds other words derived from Murū’a to signify gender—‘imrī’ (man ) and ‘imrā’a (woman)—as if to remind them of their shared origin and their shared ideal which is Murū’a. It seems to be a cautious choice that wants to search for an ‘authentic’ voice in the feminist debate. Though she generalises about feminism and simplifies its diversity, there is indeed a faction of feminism that is radical and separatist in its views and is mostly rejected by Muslim women. Positions which adopt the idea of gender relations as wars of the sexes is what Wanisi refers to and rejects.

Armed with her mastery of Arabic, she searched for a feminist vocabulary and knowledge that is truly her own. In Arabic, Murū’a (translated usually as virility) is a virtue that is highly regarded by Arabs historically. It is an interdisciplinary word found in the discourse of religious scholars, poets, intellectuals, and moral theorists. Arabs have defined it differently, but in general it means showing a great deal of humanity when one deals with the other. However, Wanisi’s theorisation of ideal gender relations focuses on moral responsibility and using local vocabulary. This might be critiqued as lacking the practicality found when talking about women’s issues within human rights discourse enforced by laws which become more universal.

In contrast, Al-Sharif was eager to deconstruct and challenge every taboo and societal expectation imposed on her as a woman including what she calls gender walls. She utilised her virtual walls including ‘Facebook walls’, as she calls them, as well as Twitter to help her seek solidarity for her mission to change women’s lives, calling herself ‘history-maker’. Every space she
encountered participates in her transformation. For example, it was in Egypt that she was exposed to the genre of comics. It was in Jeddah, just 45 minutes from Makkah but with different gender practices, that she was exposed to the variation and possibilities of Muslim women’s dress and veiling. It was the ‘walls’ of Aramco that taught her determination and how to resist: it is ironic that the freedoms guarded by Aramco’s walls are the ones that made her aware of discrimination of other kinds. They also gave her the means to deconstruct those walls by establishing others that do not isolate but build solidarity through the social media platforms:

In 2010, not long after I returned, I started a Facebook group called Saudi Female Employees of Aramco. It was risky and it was completely underground. To complain about anything at Aramco, or indeed anywhere inside Saudi Arabia, carried the risk of punishment. But slowly we started writing our demands. We wanted day care nurseries for babies in the workplace and to be allowed access to the company cars. We were all employees, but we were not allowed to use the company cars, unlike the men. (2017, pg. 289)

Travelling to the USA to study for two years left its impact on her too: ‘I never felt myself but when I moved to the USA, for the first time in my life I felt myself and I don't have to live two lives to please the person in front of me. I was myself because no one passed their judgment on me…. It feels like my dream home’ (ALOUD, 2017). Everybody noticed the change when she came back:

Every restrictive rule existed simply for my “protection”: this was the message that had been hardwired into my brain. But that circuit had been broken while I lived abroad. I was no longer so fearful of what people would think or what judgments would be passed. My colleagues said that the way I dressed, the way I thought, and the way I talked were all “totally different.” And it was true. I had never been exposed to the language of women’s rights or feminism. But even without the vocabulary, I discovered the concepts. There is an old Arabic proverb that translates to “If you have a right, you had better be determined.” Inside the walls of the Aramco compound, I found my determination. (2017, pg. 288)

So while the outward change happened after coming back from the US, there was an inward journey towards change that preceded it. Travelling abroad was the last catalyst, moving changes from inside to the outside to be shown on her body and in her behaviour. This contrasts sharply with Wanisi, who remains respectful of other people’s judgement of her appearance and behaviour. Therefore, the cosmopolitan locations left their marks on Al-Sharif. It is not surprising she
compares her activism to that of Rosa Parks and the black feminist movement. In their attempt to commute to work, Al-Sharif writes:

We discovered that the Aramco bus, which transported employees from Khobar City to the company’s offices each day, passed our building at 6:15 every morning. Seeing that it picked up a fellow employee on the same street, we went down at 6:00 a.m. to wait for it. We should have known that as Saudi women, it could never be that simple.

As we climbed up the steps of the bus, the Filipino driver gestured for us to stop. “Madam, where are you going?” he asked.

“Lamia and I exchanged looks. “Apparently we’re getting on the bus!” we replied.

“Sorry, you can’t,” came his answer.

“Why? We’re both Aramco employees.”

“Women aren’t allowed to take the employees’ bus, it’s only for men.”

“Well, are there any buses for women?” we asked.

“No, madam, sorry!” he replied. “You must get off.” (2017, pg. 223)

However, she understood, even if at a later stage, that this gender discrimination from the company was in fact a part of a long history of discrimination practiced by the company under the American administration. ‘I hadn’t known it when I applied to the company, but Aramco had a long history of discrimination, starting with Saudi nationals. In the 1950s, there were repeated strikes and demonstrations. Saudi employees both demanded better working conditions, including a forty-hour workweek, and protested against having so many Americans and so much American control at Aramco’ (2017, pg. 223). This information shows the hypocrisy of the American administration which, before leaving, asked the Saudis to hire more women.

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided critique as well as comparative analysis for the case studies. The previous two chapters demonstrate, through an intersectional analysis of my case studies, the existence and importance of Islam in the feminisms of each case. I also illustrate how the particularities of their Islamic feminisms are constructed within other social formations embedded
within historical processes in each context. This chapter compared and contrasted the intersections and manifestations of positions in Islamic feminisms in Algeria and Saudi Arabia through the lenses of representation, language, and love and marriage. These themes allow us to examine the politics of Islamic feminism in both public and intimate life and how they are represented on a spectrum. Being Islamic feminists does not mean these writers are above critique or that their works are not problematic by sometimes producing world-views or ideas that may perpetuate negative stereotypes about Muslim women such as when Al-Sharif describes all Saudi women of her generation as brainwashed or when Wanisi insisted that Arabic be the national language in spite of the multiculturalism in Algeria. This comparative analysis and critique are not intended underestimate the contributions of Al-Sharif or Wanisi in furthering our understanding of Islamic feminism in different ways but rather to problematise their representations by bringing into the discussion other Saudi and Algerian women’s views that manifest alternative representations on these themes.

Wanisi’s positions toward language and marriage are informed by the colonial and anticolonial struggles that she witnessed; this led her to negotiate an ideological and cultural identity based on an ‘Arabic-Islamic’ nationalist subjectivity and this informed the complexity of her Islamic feminist writings.

In the same way, Al-Sharif’s Islamic feminist positions, practices, and writings around language and marriage are informed by her intersecting personal experiences of class, religious extremism, education, social media, occupation, and violence within marriage. Their experiences may indeed intersect with other women’s experiences but are definitely not representations of all Algerian or Saudi women.
CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to analyse Islamic feminist practices and writings in the contexts of Algeria and Saudi Arabia. To answer the question of how Muslim women practice Islamic feminisms in these contexts, the level of analysis moved between microcosm of the women’s writings I chose as case studies to the wider macrocosm of their contexts; these local contexts are also effected by global events such as 9/11 and the War on Terror. I examined how Muslim identity and ways of living shape and inform how Islam is practiced in Algeria and Saudi Arabia and employed intersectionality to understand how Islam, and what constitute religiosity evolved (and will continue to evolve) in a dynamic process due to other political, economic and social events locally as well as globally. Thus, this thesis found how historical, sociocultural, political, economic, religious, and geographic contexts shape how Islamic feminisms are practiced in each country. The same transformation is manifested on personal levels and therefore intersectionality applied to both the texts and contexts of my case studies.

Feminism in the Muslim majority countries is often interpreted as either Islamic or secular. Findings in this research challenged the understanding around these terms and how to group women in categories based on imagined assumptions of how a Muslim woman should act, appear and behave by feminists, patriarchal or nationalist narratives. However, the inadequacy of these categories became very clear as I read the women’s writings themselves. The actions often characterised as secular such as Huda Shaʿrāwī’s burning of the veil, Wanisi’s acceptance of her role as first female minister or her appearance, Al-Sharif’s defying of the driving ban or her unveiling are all acts that they undertook after an engagement with religion through the studying of Islamic texts and history and realised the contradiction in many actions deemed requirements of Muslim women. Islam, however, remains an intrinsic part of their identity. An intersectional approach uncovered the ways in which women engage with Islam personally and politically. They
use Islam—including the Qur’an, other religious writings, and Islamic history—as a political tool to advance their feminist agendas; but they, as found in this research, relate to faith in personal ways as well. They are Islamic feminists in terms of their identities and embrace of Islam in their private and public lives, using Islamic texts and history to practice their forms of feminism. For them, Islam represents a source of faith and identity as well as a political tool.

The findings of this research reconceptualised and problematised the concept of Islamic feminism. While it builds on previous research and understanding of Islamic feminism by Cooke, Badran, AbuBaker, Rhouni, and Sedat on Islamic feminism, it adds to this the understanding that Islamic feminisms should also be considered within an intersectional framework and analysis where religion and religious identification is not the only focus but one of many experiences of women’s realities (alongside race, gender, sexuality, and class); each effect and is effected by other. This method helps us to escape the binary opposition and address the issues of multilayered marginalisations or discriminations that women endure under the name of religion. It also allowed us to appreciate the complexity of human lives, identities, experiences and contexts. Moreover, it allowed more voices to participate in the feminist and nationalists’ master narratives. Importantly, an intersectional Islamic feminism enfolds a critical stance within it that constantly reflects on its own position to avoid essential categorisation and marginalisation of other positions and to engage in dialogue with them. Therefore, intersectional Islamic feminisms should always be critical of Islamic feminisms. I argued that Islamic feminisms exist through my case studies and I also found that these are co-constructed intersectionally. When women stress or reclaim their Islam, it is always portrayed as a complex part of their identity, which is not isolated from the effects of other identity categories; therefore, it is intersectional. Intersectionality was not only a descriptive approach to axes of identity but a mechanism to understand how these categories intersect to give meaning to one another. The research therefore moved from an anticategorical position towards
finding more underlying similarities and solidarities rather than differences and to truly comprehend differences through understanding the framing process of one’s postionality.

Utilising intersectionality was important because it guided my analytical process when analysing and choosing my case studies. It also proved invaluable in my attempt to redefine Islamic feminisms as a co-constructivist and anti-categorical paradigms of women’s writings and activism which embrace religion and/or engage with religious identity in many critical ways. Islamic feminisms understood through intersectionality were seen not to subscribe to a theocentric ideology but rather appeared as a systematic study of the processes that organise families, economies and nations. These, we learnt, are co-constructed alongside the meanings of gender, race and class presented in and reinforced by these institutions separately and together. Such analysis engaged with the historical processes that produced such Islamic feminist acts or writings. Articulation of subjectivity and power within specific contexts of (economic, social, political and cultural) social formations existed within a constructive narrative. It helped in the understanding and appreciating the complexity of both the individual and society. More importantly, an intersectional framework enabled me to see how the lives of women and their work was affected by various intersecting factors, which, in turn, shaped their frame of references as Islamic feminists.

This research, unlike previous work, did not focus on women whose religiosity conforms to norms of what is expected of a Muslim woman such as wearing the veil, prioritising family life over other choices in life, or are part of an Islamic group. It also unlike previous research that sees women as feminists only if they are critical of their faith as a source of discrimination against women or that familial and tribal relationships act, in all cases, against women’s empowerment. While the autobiographical writings analysed are not historical documents they do represent voices that, at times, disrupt the grand narratives and collective memories of their nations and at other times match these narratives and even work hard to guard them against distortions. In both cases the
narratives highlighted women’s voices and views and revealed how personal histories intersect with collective memory in various ways. This thesis also enriches our understanding of how autobiographical writings interact with history and memory and how narrating the self and other women’s stories are an integral part of feminist concerns.

Algeria is one context where there has been little in-depth study of Islamic feminisms or of the relation of women to religion especially in contemporary times unlike the work undertaken in Egypt, Palestine and Morocco and in particular in English. The absence of the term in the Algerian context aroused my curiosity and pushed me to search further for reasons as to why this is the case and whether it did exist under a different name. Few studies acknowledged its existence, but it was often viewed as marginal in the feminist historiographical narrative. The Algerian context is very complicated and multicultural due to a number of factors. First, the colonial history created axes of oppression that continue to shape Algerian society today. Decolonial struggles created an Algerian identity based on Islam and Arabic culture and achieved this through education as it is associated with Islam and Arabization. Thirdly, the postcolonial period was marked by Islamism, terrorism and multilingual wars. Issues around gender has always been present and have proved to be a volatile site of contestation between different ideologies in the different periods; as well as Islam. Intersecting axes of power created around religion, political affiliation, education, language, and ethnicity have further complicated the scene. During all periods these axes of power intersect and are not isolated from the socioeconomic and political conditions of the historical moments. The prevalence of debate around theses axes until today exposes the ideological factions and complexity within that society. To illustrate this and after showing how they are embedded in a historical background, I used Zohour Wanisi as a case study, rarely acknowledged for her feminist acts but more for literary writings and political roles. This research is original in applying an intersectional analysis on her autobiographical memoir and other writings; often lacking in previous research. Throughout her writings she has constructed a nationalist reformist feminism which was nurtured
by her education in Ibn Badis's free schools and which she transmits to next generation as a ‘free’ educator and writer. She actively endorsed a narrative approach that shows how gender, religion, class, ethnicity, education, language, as well as historical and socio-political contexts have all contributed to her intersectional worldview, feminism, and political positions. Her distinctive views revolve around how she advocates for and negotiates issues such as Arabization, the family code law and mixed marriages. These all remain highly controversial issues in Algeria to date. Her literature documents the suffering and participation of women during the decolonial wars, (considered as the real revolution), resistance of civil war (refusing to call the uprising preceding it as revolution) and women’s plight. She also advocates for their neglected rights after independence. Because she witnessed two important eras in Algeria her writings deeply revolved around them which goes some way to explain her ambivalence towards collective memory, history and personal narrative. As a politician, she did not attempt to look at issues in a non-gendered way or to be herself looked at in a non-gender way. And, through all her different careers, she tried to subvert and resist gender inequality from within a nationalist and reformist framework.

In chapter 3, I found that particular Islamic feminisms are also practiced and have emerged from a Saudi historical, political, and cultural context and are oriented towards and constrained by Saudi authorities and Saudi society. Similarly, it is marked by diversity but more importantly by its cyberspace activism which created a boom in the feminist consciousness inside Saudi Arabia and in online autobiographical writings. Though social media, women become connected, voices were heard, and online activism, campaigning as well as seeking solidarity and raising consciousness were popularised. The defining features of the body of feminisms practiced in Saudi Arabia are diversity, division and e-activism to push for more rights for women. They are framed within Islam but are now made public and politicised—occupying the public space—and mediatised—gaining visibility. This development in Saudi Islamic feminism cannot be conceptualised without understanding other cultural, social, political and economic changes that have impacted gender and religion among other
institutions in society. Using intersectionality again proved useful to approach the complexity of Saudi society and history since state formation. The oil boom of the 1970s, a turning point in that history, brought rapid modernisation in the spheres of class, gender, education, media and religion that themselves had evolved and developed in unexpected way as manifested in the development of religious extremist discourse leading to another turning point in the history of Saudi Arabia which is the siege of Makkah in 1979 which again effected the same spheres mentioned above. The dominance of the extremist religious discourse goes hand in hand with other processes of modernisation such as the spread of education. The large number of young women who graduated from higher education two generations later and others returning from their scholarships were instrumental in challenging the dominance of monolithic interpretations of religious practices. Moreover, access to social media platforms through the internet which began in the new millennium initiated reforms few years later which were framed within ‘a moderate Islam’ discourse following terrorist acts which targeted civilians and non-Saudi citizens alike. Thus, a new reality was created in Saudi Arabia out of that virtual one. This new reality goes hand in hand with the political local events and global challenges such as terrorist attacks. The intersectional framework highlighted a dynamism and shifting ideologies within the religious landscape and among social actors moving in and out of intersecting circles of powers with more and more divisions and categorisations. I zoomed into this intersectionality in the second part of the chapter on Manal Al-Sharif’s e-activisms, online writings and recent memoir which show clearly how social, political, local and global conditions overlap with her personal history. Social media is incorporated into other intersecting categories of religion, gender, education, ethnicity, and class in her ‘e-activism’. I found that her formed Islamic feminism was a result of her transformed beliefs that lead to an informed feminist consciousness and action that did not question the intrinsic foundation of religion, religious identity or practicing religiosity but instead queried the entanglement of law, religion and custom. She critiques the mediation and authority of that extremist interpretation, rather than the faith’s primacy. It is also clearly evident how other parts of her identity shaped the totality of her
experience of multiple discriminations and oppressions through class, race, education, occupation and gender. She engages with the religion, its teachings, and its leaders from a more critical standpoint now, searching for her own answers and coming to her own conclusions but it was not a sudden change; it was a journey marked by its coconstructivism, dynamism, complexity and gradation. Al-Sharif does use Islamic feminism as political tool but rather as a perspective that continues to play a more personal role in her life.

In chapter 4 I revisited my case studies utilising some postcolonial feminist concepts and other theoretical interventions to examine how representation, language, location, as well as love and intimacy manifest in their work. I showed that my case studies are not representative of categories such as ‘Algerian women’ or ‘Saudi women’ but that the stories represented belong to these specific women and they intersect in some parts with other women’s experiences. Women were wary of how their stories would be read as representative of all women or consumed in ways that would feed into centuries old monolithic archetypes of Muslim women. Sometimes they resisted this but at other times they could not escape such presentation and thus became complicit in the problematic process of representation. It seems that their choice of engagement with Western feminism or media reflect concerns over authenticity or hopes for building solidarity. In such complex contexts and realities of Muslim women, the personal will always be political; thus, language does not simply become a medium of expression; love and marriage are not simply intimate relationships and gender politics will always be connected to the politics of location in its language and theorisation which are deeply intertwined. The chapter provided critique for some of their positions by bringing other women’s voices into the debate and thus revealing a spectrum of Islamic feminisms that is far from dichotomous and more in dialogue. This move meant that Islamic feminists should constantly critique their positions as a way to question categories and boundaries as they are not and should not act as rigid demarcations of identity and positioning.
Despite the effort invested in this research, it has some limitations and faced a number of challenges. One of these was the inaccessibility to Algerian resources for this research and on the topic of Islamic feminism in Algeria in general. I attempted to overcome this through seeking help with one Algerian friend in UK who contacted a friend in Algeria to provide me with Zohour Wanisi’s work which are all published in Arabic. Interestingly, he could not find her work and other books I wanted immediately. I attempted to contact the publishers and other centres, which was not successful as I received no response. Luckily, I met other Algerian researchers and researchers interested in the Algerian context in the UK who were generous in the sharing of their thoughts and engaged in dialogue over topics related to my research. Moreover, some Algerian researchers in Algeria responded to my emails and answered some of my queries in the exploratory phase of my research. I also had the opportunity, through attending conferences, to network with other Algerians and discuss issues around my research questions. However, this research would benefit from a visit to Algerian universities and their libraries to look for other manifestations of Islamic feminisms or gather more data from the context itself through systematic interviews to know more about how women relate to religion in general. Such scientific journey was at the time impossible due to personal reasons but this research would be a starting point for further research on the topic of Islamic feminisms in Algeria that extend and solidify the findings for my case study. Another point that limited access is insufficient French which is important for research into the Algerian context because of its multilingualism. My resources were limited to Arabic ones and this guided the interpretation within a limited framework. I was however able to gain in-depth knowledge of the Arab speaking context when it came to the historicisation of feminism.

It may also be useful in future to have the opportunity to meet or interview Zohour Wanisi and Manal Al-Sharif in order to gain first hand knowledge on how they understand Islamic feminism and to what extent they would agree to label their work as such. I did attempt to contact Manal Al-Sharif through email but I did not receive a response from her. Her webpage became inaccessible in
June 2018. This was a challenge which however directly echoed some of the issues that I dealt with in the context of e-activism, access and authority. I relied on the available material that was accessible from other webpages such as the Al- Ḥayāt Newspaper where she published her weekly articles. I have also kept versions of the articles I used in my analysis in my personal archive.

Generally, intersectional analyses of religion have received scant attention. Scholars have interrogated how religion and religious identity shape one’s views, life experiences, life chances, and work as feminists to a much lesser extent than gender, race, class, and sexuality. Specifically, there is a dearth of work on how Islam, identifying as Muslim, and practising Islam, shapes the lives and feminist agendas of Muslim women particularly in Saudi Arabia and Algeria. This is also made difficult with the political focus on terrorism and recent extremist acts or ideologies justified through religion. Terrorist acts become almost prohibited topics in both countries and generate mixed reactions from people and the authorities. The Black Decade in Algeria, and with the help of the Amnesty law (1999-2005) became a topic that generated unrest for Algerians and its burden is still present in the Algerian consciousness. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia and after the Siege of the Mosque in 1979, the authorities prevented discussions around the incident in media and disallowed writing about it in newspapers. The incident has been wiped quickly from public memory and little information or studies were available around it at the time. Only recently has some attention begun to reflect on the role of that incident on gender, education, media, and social and cultural life and religious discourse itself.

It is by bringing in more women's writings and different voices and views and discussing them within an intersectional analysis that we can begin to see a broader picture of how religious identity combines with their gender, class, sexual, race and educational experiences which will always also intersect with social, economic and political conditions of their contexts. This will challenge both feminist and patriarchal categorisations and narratives and illuminate understanding of the complex lived realities of these women.
Because religion is often marginalised from historiographical feminist discourse in the Middle East and North Africa, it is problematic to assume a clear demarcation between what we might call ‘secular’ and ‘Islamic’ feminists. Upon closer examination, the work of these feminists reveals a more complex picture regarding the roles that religion, faith, and religious identity play in their feminist practices and activism which I still call Islamic feminisms but in anti-categorical and co-constructivist paradigms that respect and truly engage with women who embrace or debate religion or religious identity in their writings or activism in spite of widespread Islamophobia targeting Muslim women or patriarchal interpretations of religion. While it may be convenient to classify women in a binary fashion, there are many intersecting grounds to be discovered. Naming and doing are historical processes. The boundaries drawn around categories such as Islamic and secular and what belong to them afterwards as Arab feminism vs Islamic feminism are blurry and complex. The complexities of lived realities are lost in this demarcation as it only serves the agenda of certain people at certain times. Using intersectionality enriches the debate and conceptions within the established literature of Arab secular feminism and Islamic feminism.
REFERENCES


Dill, B.T. (2002). Work at the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions of difference in higher education. *Connections: Newsletter of the Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity*, (Fall), 5-7.


_____ A Saudi woman’s voice. Retrieved from https://saudirevelations.wordpress.com/about/


Hancock, A. M. (2007). When multiplication doesn’t equal quick addition: Examining intersectionality as a research paradigm. *Perspectives on Politics, 5*(1), 63–79.


